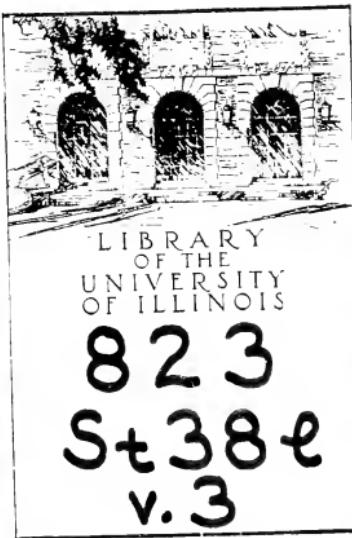
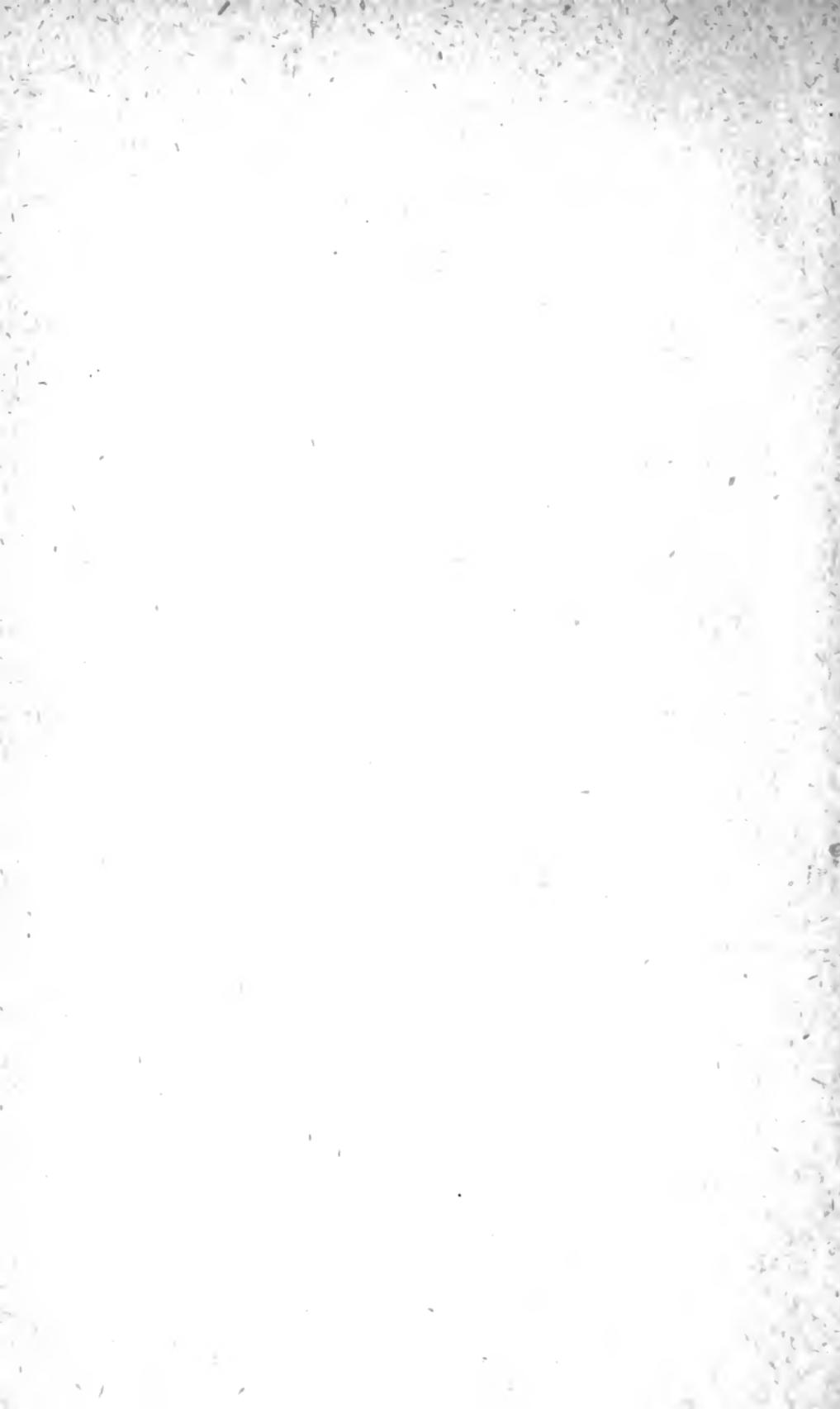


LADY LOWATER'S
COMPANION

AUTHOR OF ST. OLAVE'S





LADY LOWATER'S COMPANION.

VOL. III.



J. Stephenin
Dargeling. August, 1884
LADY LOWATER'S COMPANION

BY

THE AUTHOR OF

"ST. OLAVE'S," "JANITA'S CROSS," "ANNETTE,"
"THE SENIOR SONGMAN,"
&c., &c.

'This is the condition of the battle, which man
that is born upon the earth shall fight; that if he be
overcome, he shall suffer.'—*Esdras*.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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LADY LOWATER'S COMPANION.

CHAPTER I.

‘AND now, Valence,’ said Lady Lowater, when they were alone together, ‘tell me what is this about your going away? You came to me for an indefinite time, and I have not half done with you yet. What is it, child?’

‘It is only this,’ Valence replied, quietly, ‘that I must, some time or other, go back to my work at Hurchester, and the longer I stay here, the harder it will be to go.’

Lady Lowater looked into the girl’s face, then turned away, and was silent

for a while. She thought she understood.

Valence's eyes were downcast. There was a mist, as of tears, under their lashes. She was playing nervously with the rosy-red fruit upon her plate. Her own cheeks were scarcely less rosy-red. There was a tone of weariness, of yearning in her voice. This was not the Valence Dormer of a few days ago, bright, happy, fearless, stepping about so gaily in those faded old rooms, making wherever she went a sunshine strange enough, because so rare in that else melancholy house.

Had a new interest crept into the girl's life? Had sweet dreams and fancies, unawares, taken possession of her heart? Dreams which she thought could never be realised, fancies in which Sir Merrion, so far above her in social rank and advantage, bore a part? If so, it was natural enough. What girl could be smiled upon

by him, and not give all he wished, nay, give it even before it was asked by other than gentle looks and tones ?

And if Valence had unconsciously let the treasure of her love be won, and now her eyes were opened, Lady Lowater thought she knew well enough how the girl's pride and independence would alike urge her to flight before her secret betrayed itself to those about her. Likely enough she would feel, and one could but honour her for feeling it, that she was standing at the gate of a paradise barred from her alike by custom and prejudice. Not many a man would stoop so far to take only worth, only honesty, only clearness of heart and brain, and fold them round with his own purple mantle of rank ; slight beauty, birth, wealth, the grace that fair surroundings give, and take these other things to him instead. She might

well stand before those closed gates and feel that entrance was not for her.

All this Lady Lowater could well understand as a girl of Valence's pride would take it, knowing nothing more. What lay beyond it all she must never know. Nor need she, if that marriage, to her apparently so far above her deserts, could be brought about. The sharp, clever, contriving mother, whose character Lady Lowater could read as an open book, had no suspicion. Mr. Antony's interest would be silence over all the past. The sword would be removed from over her own head, the lurking danger from her boy's future. If only this young girl, best, noblest soul amongst them all, could be made to understand that the love, perhaps even now given, was blest and welcomed, instead of being, as pride might whisper to her, set too high !

But one must not speak a word. Lady Lowater knew Valence Dorner well enough to be convinced that, if she loved Sir Merrion, the merest hint of others' knowledge would drive her away, never to return. Quite other ground must be taken. And my lady took it now. She said, in a half-jesting tone,

'Well, Valence, I don't think you have had such a brilliant time here that you need seek a corrective for it in a hospital ward. What have you been, child, but nurse to one patient instead of a dozen? And now, you see, here is another ready for you. You must stay and see old Ben to the end of his trouble, as you saw Margaret to the end of hers. And then I want you myself. Are there no sick people but those that can be treated with port wine and puddings, for you to help and comfort?'

‘You are very kind, Lady Lowater, but all the same I think I ought to go. You see, I have been a long time away from my work.’

‘Are you under any engagement to the hospital committee?’

‘No. Only, you know, it is my way of earning a living. One must think of that. At least, I must.’

‘Exactly. Only I think Merrion and I are as much bound to find suitable care and nursing for the people on our estate as the Hurchester committee is for those who have to go to the hospital there. And, instead of your going back to your old work, I want you to stay here and give some decent young women training enough to help them to go out amongst the poor people and do them a little good in cases of sickness and accident. Doesn’t that

view of your duty commend itself to you ?'

Valence was obliged to say that it did, not being able to explain to Lady Lowater the other view.

‘Very well, then, your work is here just as much as there. It seems to me that you are gaining just as much professional experience in one place as the other. You are teaching the poor how to help themselves in the midst of their own surroundings, instead of only helping them yourself in the midst of yours. I should say it is just as useful to help these Lowater people to make the best of their own appliances, as to go back to Hurchester, where there are no doubt plenty of other people ready to do your nursing work as well as you can do it yourself. . Don’t you see that, too ?’

‘Well, yes,’ said Valence, ‘it is true

enough. Half the battle with everyone is being able to make the best of what lies close at hand.'

'Then why don't you do it yourself, child, and stay here and make the best of what *you* have close at hand?'

Valence could only smile at being caught in her own argument, but she did not give way. It was no matter with her of splendid self-sacrifice. She had not the slightest doubt in her own mind that, if Lady Lowater knew what Sir Merrion had been saying in the plantation that morning, she would urge nothing so strongly as an immediate return to the hospital work at Hurchester. Miss Pentwistle had said, and others had hinted, that matrimonial schemes were already in hand for the young baronet, and therefore it would be a pity if she, who had no personal interest in the matter, should stand in their way.

But this she could not explain. She could but smile inwardly to think that she was leaving Lowater Court for the very reason that would have made most girls anxious to remain. Why could she not be like most girls? Sir Merrion was brave and frank and handsome, and yet the thought of spending her life with him was so uninteresting that she did not need to ask herself whether she was doing the right thing in leaving that privilege to some one who would value it more highly. It was not even flying from a temptation, it was only preventing another from disappointment which words of hers would have to bring if she stayed. Why was she different from other girls? Why was not her love at command when an eligible proprietor offered for it? Life must be much simpler when one could take it as her mother did, using marriage just as

a step in the ladder of convenience or promotion.

But Lady Lowater, having waited some time for a reply, made the way plainer by her next words.

‘Well, Valence, I don’t want you to be in a hurry. Anyhow, you must stay with me for the next few days, for you know Miss Pentwistle is going away, and Merrion talks of taking himself off to the Norfolk Broads to-morrow, for a few days’ fishing. You will not leave me all alone, I suppose. The Pierpoints wrote to him last week asking him to go, but he would not promise until he knew that you would stay with me until he came back. Merrion is very good to his mother.’

Lady Lowater thought there was probably another motive for her boy’s anxiety about the length of Valence’s stay, but she did not bring that forward. And the girl

replied, with quite new cheerfulness,

‘If you are going to be alone, Lady Lowater, I am sure I will stay. I did not know Sir Merrion was going away. I will just keep on nursing old Ben as usual, and we can settle all about the rest afterwards.’

‘You are a good girl,’ said Lady Lowater, kissing her. ‘I thought I should be able to keep you.’

‘And, Valence,’ she said, after a pause, during which she been caressing the girl’s hand, ‘how glad I should be if you could stay with me always, and be a daughter to me. I mean it, my child, I do indeed.’

But Valence only turned away. For, as Lady Lowater said those last words, Sir Merrion came in with his gun and his dogs, to look for a railway time-table.

CHAPTER II.

EVERYTHING connected with the visit to Crumbleby was as satisfactory as Miss Pentwistle could desire. Miss Paskerley wrote at once to say that nothing would give her so much pleasure as to see her dear friend for a few days. The country was looking lovely, and though she and her sister could not offer the luxuries of Lowater Court, still a little change was always pleasant, and they would make up in the warmth of their welcome for the comparative humbleness of their surroundings. Also, as Miss Pentwistle had business in Crumbleby, they would go in by

the omnibus and spend a good long day, there being always plenty of little shopping arrangements to be attended to, which would fill up the time whilst she did what was necessary. Nothing could have been more convenient.

Then Sir Merrion was to be away, so there would be no evening strolls and dangerous *tête-à-têtes* for the young people. Miss Pentwistle need not hurry back on that account. And she was pretty sure now, too, that she need not hurry back for fear of Miss Dormer supplanting her in her position at the Court. Let Lady Lowater make as much of the dear girl as she liked, for the few days during which she had her all to herself. The time would soon come now when she would be thankful to send her back to Hurchester, and never hear another word about her.

So Miss Pentwistle decided not to hurry

back. She would give herself until Sir Merrion returned from the Broads, unless that should detain her beyond the third garden-party. For at that garden-party Mrs. Antony was to be present, and there she was to be publicly exposed, in a manner which Miss Pentwistle had already decided upon as not being at all too cruel, considering the effrontery of the lady's previous behaviour. The rest would follow in its own time.

Mr. Rock, good unsuspecting little man, anxious only for justice to be done, and for poor old Dyson's pecuniary difficulties to be cleared away, had made a note of the various items of information which Miss Pentwistle was to obtain, if possible. Mr. Antony, true to his promise, had so represented the matter at the meeting of the poor-law guardians that the five shillings a week was summarily stopped. And,

hearing that Miss Pentwistle was going into the neighbourhood of Crumbleby, he had come over to the Court himself, to have a conversation with her, during which he also, with greater acumen than Mr. Rock, had noted down the facts which must be ascertained, the register of marriage which must be sought out and copied; and various other points which Miss Pentwistle must not forget if her inquiries were to be brought to a triumphant issue.

That excellent woman listened with the greatest gravity. Mr. Antony laid everything down so clearly, told her how, step by step, she must follow out the chain of evidence which was to connect Libbie Dyson with some prosperous married woman, name and residence at present unknown, who had been suffering parochial funds to be so shamefully misapplied.

And he ended by a neat little compliment to Miss Pentwistle.

‘It could be in no better hands than yours, my dear madam, in no better hands than yours. I have perfect satisfaction in leaving the matter with you. At the same time, if you feel even now that the trouble is more than you wish to incur, I will myself, rather than allow the inquiry to drop, go over to Crumbleby and push it to a termination.’

‘Oh ! dear no, Mr. Antony, not on any account,’ said Miss Pentwistle, feeling tolerably certain that the inquiry would very soon come to a termination if the solicitor had the pushing of it. ‘I assure you I shall have the greatest satisfaction in doing my utmost to bring home this disgraceful neglect to the door of those who have been guilty of it. Do not think for a moment that a little trouble would deter

me. I am entirely at the service of the public good.'

And Miss Pentwistle bowed to Mr. Antony, and Mr. Antony bowed to Miss Pentwistle, feeling that he had got the right person in the right place, and that all would be well accordingly.

The following Tuesday found Lady Lowater's companion comfortably settled down at Broxthorpe, the pleasant little village where Miss Paskerley and Miss Millicent Paskerley had their home, two miles away from Crumbleby. She gave herself a day or two for uninterrupted intercourse with her friends, and for making various little inquiries which might tend to the cementing of a link here and there in the chain of circumstances; then the three ladies took the omnibus and went into town for a day—two on shopping intent, the other on detective business.

Everything fitted together like a dissected puzzle. Crumbleby was one of the quietest of quiet places. People who settled there generally settled for good. At any rate Mrs Porringer, Libbie Dyson's former mistress, had done so. She lived in the same neat, tidy, trim little house on the outskirts of the town, to which, just five and twenty years before, the old woodman brought his pretty daughter with her bundle, and all the rest of her worldly goods packed in a paper-covered trunk. And Mrs. Porringer remembered everything, too. More than that, she was a woman who liked to say what she knew.

Yes, she could tell the whole story as if it had only happened yesterday. How the old man came in his best Sunday coat with brass buttons, and a certain look of severity upon his honest face; and how he was so particular that a strict eye should

be kept upon the buxom lass whom he had brought as maid-of-all-work at ten pounds a year. No followers allowed, nothing of that sort, and to be in always at half-past eight, Sundays and week-days alike. And, if she took up with anyone likely to do her a mischief, her friends were to be let know of it, and some one should come and look after her.

Which of course was very proper, Mrs. Porringer said, and she wished everybody was as careful. But Libbie was a girl who knew how to take care of herself.

Not one of the shiftless sort, she, by any means, who go slipping and sliding into shame, and then come down upon their friends to help them. She had a pretty face, and she knew it; but she meant it to do her good, not harm. And when the young doctor, who lodged in the house, began to cast sweet eyes upon her, she

gave him to understand that she knew what she was about, and that, if he meant anything at all, he must do what was proper. And he did. No gentleman could have done more ; for, when she had finished her year of service, he sent her to school for six months, and after that she came back as a lodger to Mrs. Porringer for a few weeks, to get her wedding things ready ; and Mrs. Porringer gave her the breakfast, and she was married in a nice neat grey silk, to be useful afterwards, at the parish church, by the Rev. Benjamin Grey, who was still vicar of Crumbleby, and Miss Pentwistle might see the register any day that she liked.

Which Miss Pentwistle did, the very next morning, coming in by the omnibus on purpose. Edward Southwell, the very name Miss Dormer had told her, written in a good, gentlemanly, well-formed hand ;

and Libbie Dyson underneath, shaky as one might expect, and with considerable want of purpose in the long letters, a regular maid-of-all-work style, and bad even at that.

Mrs. Porringer was sure it was the same. There could be no mistake. The old man had told her all about himself. He was head woodman at Lowater Court, had been there ever since he was little past a boy; had a daughter Margaret whom he hoped to get into service at the Court some day; had had Libbie there too, but she did not get on well among so many, and so he wanted to put her where only one was kept, and where the mistress looked after things herself. Whereupon Mrs. Porringer had told him that the girl could not have come to a better place than her own, for if there was one thing she prided herself on more than another, it

was that no servant of hers had ever come to grief in any shape or way whatever. So the old man might go home comfortable.

And then Mrs. Porringer, who, like her own clock in the corner, only wanted setting a-going, cheerfully entered into particulars concerning Libbie's further career. The ungrateful little thing had never sent her a word of thanks, but she had kept her eye on her for all that. Mr. Southwell took her away, when they were married, to Portsmouth, where he set up in practice with another gentleman, and would no doubt have done well enough, but that he died at the end of a twelve-month, and then Mrs. Southwell furnished a little house and took in lodgers. Mrs. Porringer knew all about it because she had a sister herself married in Portsmouth, and she used to hear a little bit of gossip

now and then in that way. Everyone said the doctor's pretty widow did not make much of a trouble of it, especially as she got a very pleasant young man, a lieutenant in the —th, to lodge with her, and, before he had been there half-a-year, they were engaged, he not seeming to have any friends to interfere, though it was not at all the sort of match that she could have looked for, Mr. Dormer being a gentleman born.

‘Dormer was the name then?’ said Miss Pentwistle.

Mrs. Porringer said Dormer *was* the name. And ten months after her husband died, Libbie Dyson was Mrs. Dormer, and on the anniversary of Mr. Southwell's funeral she sailed away to some foreign part with her new man. Everybody said it was a shame to make such quick work of it, but Libbie was always one to do a

good thing for herself when she had the chance, you could not have her in your house four-and-twenty hours without finding that out. Always on the watch for what would serve her own ends, but so pretty and pleasant with it, and doing her own work so cleverly too, that it did not seem to be one's business to find fault. And after that Mrs. Porringer had not heard about her for she might say years and years.

Miss Pentwistle listening quietly, putting in a word now and then, and thinking how very curious it would have been if, instead of herself, Mr. Antony had been hearing the story, thanked Mrs. Porringer and complimented her upon the clearness of her memory. And had she quite lost sight of the girl, or rather woman now?

Well, Mrs. Porringer could not say that

she had quite lost sight of her, for this same married sister at Portsmouth, happened to be wanting a change of air only the winter before, and her husband took her up to Filey on the Yorkshire coast, and coming home they stayed a few nights at Hurchester, because of breaking the journey, and there they lodged with some very decent people, shoemakers, who had a daughter ill in the hospital. And, as it happened, they said something about a Miss Dormer who was nursing her, and Mrs. Porringer's sister caught at the name, and found out she belonged to the same party that had married the young lieutenant, well on to five and twenty years before. And, Mrs. Dormer being a person that Mrs. Porringer's sister had an interest in, she kept on asking until she had made out all about her, which was that she and her husband had lived abroad in one place

or another, off and on, for eighteen years, and then he had come home on sick-leave, and they had come to settle down at Hurchester, and he had died there. But it did not seem a bit more trouble to her losing him than losing the other one ; for, as soon as she had cast her crape, she was as wide awake as ever, and, after she had made herself more talked about than was proper, she had got engaged to a Mr. Antony, a lawyer from somewhere a good way off, and they were to be married in the spring.

‘ And more than that I cannot tell you, ma’am,’ said Mrs. Porringer, ‘ for my sister that lives in Portsmouth didn’t know the shoemaker and his wife beyond lodging there for the few days, on account of her being delicate. And, to tell the truth, more I did not care to hear, for when I find a person behaves that way, I say let them alone. A respectable party like my-

self is best separate. But what I have told you, you may depend upon, like the gospel itself, for truth.'

CHAPTER III.

MISS PENTWISTLE could supply the rest, however, from her own observation. She could not help smiling to herself as she took her seat in the omnibus, and rode back to Broxthorpe. Mrs. Antony's own information had filled up the blank about Hurchester, though not exactly after Mrs. Porringer's fashion. And it had filled up the blank about India, too, in such a manner as to leave the impression that her life there had been passed in the atmosphere of aristocracy and Government Houses. The good people of Lowater need not think that in receiving her into their select midst

they were welcoming her to society and surrounding her with luxuries to which she had not previously been accustomed. True, her sun had for a season retired behind clouds. The death of her husband had compelled her to severe economy, but still viceroys and lieutenant-governors were her native element, the refinement peculiar to the upper classes was the air in which she breathed most freely, and Queen Anne ink-stands and antique punch-ladles were her birthright.

Miss Pentwistle almost shook with mingled triumph and indignation as she thought over the conversation which had passed between herself and Mrs. Antony during that bridal call of scarce four months ago. How ready she had been to accept all the little hints and suggestions thrown out from time to time as to previous high position and connections. The

bits of cracked china mounted on lace brackets on each side of the fireplace, 'heirlooms, you know, and so very precious to me,' the solicitor's wife had explained. The little ivory miniature of a cavalry officer, framed in ebony, and that again framed in ruby velvet above the writing-table.

'One of my ancestors, dear Miss Pentwistle, served in the Peninsular war, I believe. Everyone says there is such a remarkable likeness between us, but really I do not see it myself.'

And Miss Pentwistle had accepted the fact with such alacrity—the fact of the likeness, that is, not Mrs. Antony's inability to see it. She could have boxed her own ears for her stupidity, knowing as she did now that a smock-frock and a woodman's hatchet would have been so much more to the point than the military accou-

trements which the miniature so conspicuously displayed. And then the innocent way in which she had collected and set before Lady Lowater one proof after another of Mrs. Antony's claims to good breeding—nay, her almost princely descent, for had there not been something said about a king of Thule? All these things, so disconcerting to a woman who prides herself upon her acuteness and penetration, came back upon Miss Pentwistle now, and made her feel that no amount of humiliation could possibly be more than the solicitor's wife deserved. Of course, as she allowed to herself, jogging along there in the Crumbleby omnibus between the pleasant meadows and pasture-lands which bordered the Broxthorpe road, it was very disagreeable for poor Miss Dormer, who had not the least idea of the manner in which her clever

mother had been deceiving them all. But then again, it would make no real difference in the end.

In the course of a few days she was returning to her work at the Hurchester hospital, where events which had transpired hundreds of miles away would probably never be known, and, even if they were known, they would not affect her position as a useful, dependable, well-trained nurse on the regular staff. They would have affected it far more if things had gone on as they were until Sir Merrion had actually declared himself, or, worse still, she had become Lady Lowater. Because, if Miss Pentwistle had any discernment at all, she did not believe that Miss Dormer cared for Sir Merrion. If he had made her an offer, she would have accepted him, no girl in her senses would have done otherwise; but it would have

been only a marriage of convenience. And then, when the facts of her mother's previous career came to light, it would have been a marriage of misery, nothing less than that, to a girl of Valence Dormer's independent spirit. Much better then that she should go and take up the work which really belonged to her.

When the catastrophe came, it would distress her much less if she had occupation to divert her mind, and also if the knowledge were conveyed to her when she was at a safe distance from the place where the most egregious part of the deception had been carried on. If, as Mrs. Murray-Mortimer said, the ladies who had called upon the solicitor's wife would be ready to perish with disgust when they found out who she really was, what would Miss Dormer's own feelings be, surrounded by those very people whose kindness had

been so cruelly imposed upon? No, nothing so providential for her as to have a loophole of escape ready, and to take her departure for Hurchester before the facts of the case were public property.

Miss Pentwistle procured a copy of the marriage register from the parish church of Crumbleby, and then, through Mrs. Porringer's sister, she procured one of the second marriage from Portsmouth. Then she returned to Lowater Court in comfortable time for the last garden-party.

She said nothing definite at first. Lady Lowater had never expressed much interest about the real purport of the journey. Having made up her mind to continue Ben Dyson's weekly allowance out of her own private purse, she had dismissed the inquiry business as a mere superfluity. It was Valence Dormer who asked whether the culprit had been detected.

'I don't feel at liberty to enter upon the subject just now,' Miss Pentwistle replied, cautiously. 'I have been fortunate enough to gather together a considerable mass of evidence which may prove very satisfactory to the poor-law guardians, but I should prefer looking over it carefully, and arranging the whole according to date, before I feel in a position to lay it before them.'

And, as Miss Pentwistle was known to be great at tabulating and classifying, and as she disliked being hurried over her accounts as much as being hurried over the arrangement of her ringlets, no further questions were asked.

CHAPTER IV.

THE following morning Sir Merrion came home from the Norfolk Broads, with his fishing-baskets and his tackle and his wading boots, and all the rest of his piscatorial gear, looking as bright and gay as though no important question were yet unsettled for him.

Indeed, Valence Dormer's behaviour, during that interview in the plantation, so far from discouraging him, had added a touch of piquancy and interest to a love affair which hitherto had been almost too safe to be interesting. He was rather pleased than otherwise that she was not

ready to snap him up almost before he gave her the opportunity of so doing. That she would refuse him was, under the circumstances, simply impossible, but that she meant to lead him on a little, not exactly to play with him, for that would have been too risky, but to try her power after a pretty, feminine fashion, to let him see that, spite of her cleverness and independence and all that sort of thing, she had just a touch of the coquettishness which men do not entirely dislike; this was rather delightful than otherwise. It was the garlic at the bottom of the salad. The mixture would have been appetising enough without it, but its presence gave just the sense of perfection which one could better understand than explain.

‘Valence is talking of returning to Hurchester immediately after the garden-

party, Merrion,' said his mother, as the young man was arranging the hoops on the croquet-lawn, an hour or two after his arrival. He always liked to measure the distance himself, and get everything in order for a good game.

‘Returning to Hurchester, mother? She may talk about it as much as she likes, but I don’t mean her to do any such thing. She may just stay with you until it is time for her to go and buy her wedding finery. I have made up my mind about that.’

‘Then, Merrion, I think you must take the earliest opportunity of telling her so.’

‘Just what I mean to do, little mother, as soon as she gives me the chance. But there’s no such thing as getting a fair shot at her. Instead of stopping where she is, like most other girls, she flies off just when a fellow thinks he can take

aim, and, before you can get your gun into position, she's right away on the other side of the field, leaving you nothing to fire at but an empty bush. I'm sure she can't help but know by this time what I mean.'

'Valence is a very proud girl, Merrion, as proud as if she had all the blood of all the Howards in her veins. As you say, I think she cannot help seeing what you mean, but she may think that I should make a difficulty about it. You see, neither Mr. nor Mrs. Antony are quite on a level with our people. She may feel that, having come here more for the sake of being useful to Margaret Dyson than as a regular guest, it is rather like taking an advantage of her position. That is the only difficulty I can imagine.'

'Jove! mother, I believe you've hit it exactly. I never thought about that be-

fore, but I shouldn't wonder if it's nothing else makes her so stand-off and independent. Couldn't you say something, now, to put her up to what your feelings really are about it? Tell her how I wish she would marry me—something of that sort, you know, only not quite so plain-spoken.'

Lady Lowater smiled.

'It must not be anything like so plain-spoken, Merrion, my boy. If you want to send Valencee Dormer off to the ends of the earth by the very next train, ask me to tell her that I should like her to marry you.'

'Ah! well then, mother, don't do it. 'Pon my word, I should have thought that would have set everything right, only girls are so queer. I mean those that are worth wasting powder-and-shot upon. Now, if I'd gone half as far with Juliet Belleray.'

‘And had not married her, you would have had an action brought against you for breach of promise. That is just the difference, you see, between a girl who will only marry because she loves, and one who is determined to be married anyhow.’

‘It’s much easier, though, mother, to get on with the sort that are determined to be married anyhow. They make the way so plain for you. Now, Valence Dormer always seems as if she were trying to trip a fellow up, whichever way he turns. I do think, mother, if you can’t tell her right out you would like her to marry me, you could manage to hint at it somehow. And let her know I wouldn’t interfere with anything she wanted to do. I believe that would go a long way. Only leave me the game, and she may do just

as she likes with me and all the rest of the things.'

'Merrion, you are going to be a model husband. But I really don't think I can help you any more than I have done already. I have told Valence that nothing would please me more than to have her here always, and—to have her as my daughter.'

Merrion gave his mallet a fling in the air, and then, catching it as it came down, shot it, after the manner of a tomahawk, at a crow that was walking solemnly across the croquet-lawn ; missing his mark, however, as entirely as if the crow had been Miss Dormer.

'Jove ! mother. Then, that's bound to settle it. You've told her that, since I've been away at the Broads ?'

'Well, it was just before you went ; but

I don't think you have had an opportunity of speaking with her since.'

'Then it will be all right. Depend upon it, that's just what she's been hanging off about—didn't know whether you would like it or not. And I like her ever so much better for it, too. I hate to see girls ready to drop into your mouth like a ripe peach, whether you're hungry for dessert or not. I'll have it out with her, little mother, before another day is over; and then she may go to Hurchester as soon as she likes, not to her blue-serge and her white aprons in the hospital ward, though—to something very different from that. Jove! won't she look pretty with a veil and a wreath, and the rest of the belongings? I saw a veil that would be just the very thing for her hanging up in a window in London. There

won't have been a prettier bride come into the family, mother, except yourself, since Lady Ermengarde that hangs in the west corridor, with her diamonds and her point lace. But I think she ought to wear your veil, mother. I have always said, when I married, I should like my wife to wear your veil. It is such a beauty.'

Lady Lowater sighed.

'Very well, Merrion, if you wish it, and Valence will have it so. Only I hope it will bring her a much happier life than mine.'

'I hope so too, mother. It always seems to me that you have rather a dull life of it here, with that everlasting Miss Pentwistle, propriety itself, with a couple of ringlets on each side. But we will dance to a different measure when there is a young Lady Lowater to open the ball.

You know, I shan't let you go to that little patch of a dower-house on the edge of the park, so don't think it. You've got to stay here all the same, only with Valence and me instead of Miss Pentwistle. You will like that better, won't you, now?

'I shall like anything that you like, my boy. To make your old mother content you only have to be content yourself.'

'Old, indeed!—such rubbish!' and Merrion stopped in placing a hoop to go over and kiss his mother as she stood there, tall, stately in her black dress amongst the roses. 'You're as handsome yet as any lady in the land, and I'm ready to fight the first man that says me nay. There will not be a braver couple at the marriage ball than the old Lady Lowater and the young one.'

‘And you will sell out, then, Merrion, will you not?’

‘Sell out! Well, yes, I should think I shall. A fellow doesn’t want to be knocking up and down such a place as India when he has a wife and everything comfortable at home. I see the *Arethusa* is going out with troops next week. If it hadn’t been for Valence Dormer, I should have gone back with her, for I only just wanted to have a look at you and off again; but, you see, the young lady has made all the difference. And look, mother. As I was passing Ryder’s, coming through London, I saw the very loveliest ring in the window, and I thought I might as well go in and buy it.’

Lady Lowater smiled as she looked into her boy’s eager, satisfied face. It was so like him, having once made up his mind, to take all the rest for granted. It was

almost a wonder he had not bought the wedding-ring as well.

‘Let me see it, Merrion.’

He dived into one of his multitudinous pockets, and brought out a little morocco case, from which, when he had opened it, there streamed forth a light as of mingled fire and rainbow, from three opals set upon a golden circlet.

‘There, mother,’ he said, first slipping it upon her finger and turning her towards the sunlight. ‘I think it’s good enough to go with any of the Lowater jewels. I thought, when I was about it, I would not stick at a few pounds.’

Lady Lowater took it off after examining the stones, and put it back into the case with a shadow upon her face which almost quenched the rainbow lustre.

‘It is a pretty thing,’ she said, ‘but opals are not lucky gems. Mine was an

opal ring. It did not bring me much happiness.'

'I don't know for that, little mother,' said Merrion, with the unconscious way he had of looking at things from his own point of view. 'You and I have been very comfortable here all along, and we shall be right enough by-and-by, when you get somebody better than Miss Pentwistle for a companion. You just want somebody young and bright to cheer you up. Lowater Court won't be like the same place when Valence Dormer comes to it for good. I expect you will take a fresh lease of life then, and look younger and handsomer than ever.'

'We shall see, Merrion. But take care——'

And my lady walked across the lawn to where the young man was fixing one of the wires.

‘You are setting that crooked. Valence is not a skilful player. She will never get her ball through.’

CHAPTER V.

IT was the afternoon of the garden-party. The guests began to assemble. Everyone came to this entertainment, because it was to be the last of the series ; and besides, no one knew how soon Sir Merrion might be going away. He had said, and so had Lady Lowater, that the length of his visit would depend on circumstances. If the circumstances said, ‘go,’ well, then he would probably start with the *Arethusa*, a troop-ship that was sailing from Portsmouth the following week. At any rate that was what old Colonel Pontifex said, and he knew a great deal about the move-

ments of the men of the —th. And, Sir Merrion once gone, there would be no more garden-parties at Lowater Court until he came back again.

The countess was there with her niece, and the bishop's lady from Byborough, and there was a plentiful sprinkling of officers and their wives, bright, merry, sparkling women, ready for croquet and flirtation to any extent. And the Dean of Byborough and Lady Evelyn came, and of course Mrs. Murray-Mortimer put in an appearance with her two daughters ; and Lady Belleray was there with her troop of girls, and there were the Dollingbrokes, and all the other neighbouring county people, not to mention the usual fringe of middle-class respectability, for whom such a garden-party as Lady Lowater's was the event of the year in which it happened. Mrs. Petipase and her party came in full force,

so did Mrs. Crudenay and the curate's wife from Perry Point ; and, last but not least, Mr. and Mrs. Antony were there.

Mrs. Antony looked bewitching this time in creamy pink muslin, her hair dexterously tousled down to her very eyebrows, floating loops and wreaths of tulle and ribbon gracefully arranged in all directions about her; a model of artistic elegance, from her bonnet, which was a vapoury mass of lace touched here and there with roses, down to the tips of the dainty little boots which were, to tell the truth, uncomfortably tight, but which peeped out so very effectively from under the muslin flounces as the solicitor's wife sat in a conspicuous place on the lawn, not this time watching the progress of affairs between Sir Merrion and her daughter, for Valencee was most unaccountably keeping out of the way this afternoon, but not-

ing with scarcely less satisfaction that, not having her to attend to, the young baronet was paying scarcely ordinary attention to anyone else.

‘A pretty woman, is she not?’ said the countess to Lady Lowater, ‘more so than a plain little man like Mr. Antony could have expected to secure for his wife. I wonder now what she saw in him, except that newly-painted house on the Byborough Road.’

‘A thousand or two a year probably,’ suggested my lady.

‘Oh! well, yes, maybe, and I suppose she had no property of her own, otherwise she would scarcely have taken up with such a short-length of a man, even if the thousands reached to half a dozen. I don’t know how it is, but Mr. Antony always reminds me of those remnants that are sold cheap in bundles at the end

of the season, for charities, you know.'

Lady Lowater laughed.

'Well, at any rate, Mrs. Antony cannot plead want of experience, if she was deceived in the purchase. She has made bargains of the kind so often before that she ought to know what she is about.'

'Yes, and then the inducement of having a little more money at her disposal. But they do say he was not always so bad-looking. Mr. Mortimer, who has lived about here all his life, will have it that five-and-twenty years ago Clayton Antony was as personable a man as his poor brother Theodore, who gave the family so much trouble. I daresay you remember Theodore; he used to be in the office, you know, with his brother, before he turned out such a scamp. I can only say, however, that if the lawyer ever had any good looks, time has dealt hardly with him.'

‘Time deals hardly with us all,’ said Lady Lowater.

And as she said it she looked across the croquet lawn to where Mr. Antony, neat, dapper, smooth, insignificant, was doing the agreeable after his fashion to a little cluster of ladies. Like his handsome young brother Theodore? No, never. Her thoughts went back five-and-twenty years ago, more than that, to the life and the hope and the promise that had been hers then—back over the pathway strewn with the ashes of a dead passion, along which she had had to travel all these years, bound hand and foot, as to a corpse, with the remembrance of her own evil deed.

‘Time deals hardly with us all,’ she said.

The countess, a blonde, comfortable woman, only laughed and said,

‘Nonsense, my dear Lady Lowater. I don’t think we have any need to complain. Time deals more hardly with many people than he has done with you and me. And then, you see, you have your life to live over again in Sir Merrion. You are better off in that respect than I am, for I shall never see a child of my husband’s name on our land. Now Sir Merrion will keep up the credit of the Lowaters when you are gone.’

Lady Lowater played with the flowers in her belt, but said nothing, and just then Miss Pentwistle came up with Mrs. Antony.

‘We are going round to the back of the Court,’ she said, ‘to look at some of those old stone carvings in the kitchen yards. Mr. Rock, who knows all about everything of that sort, is going to explain them to us. Mrs. Antony says she has never seen

them before, and I think the countess once said she was interested in remains of that sort.'

‘By all means;’ and Lady Muchmarsh, with somewhat of an effort, for she had considerable weight to carry, rose from the garden-seat. ‘I have doted upon antiquities ever since the Archaeological Society came over to our place. You can’t think how interesting it is to hear them talk. I wonder, Lady Lowater, you have never had them here to look at that old chamber where Monmouth slept. I am sure they go miles to see places that are not half so curious. You will come too, will you not?’

‘Oh, yes; I should like Mr. Rock to have a good following, since he is taking so much trouble to explain things to us. Do the servants know we are coming, Miss Pentwistle?’

‘Yes. I told them to have things ready. And yonder is little Mr. Rock, with his note-book, waiting for us. I must look up some more people though, for I am sure he has been taking great pains to prepare the subject.’

‘I wonder what there is that man cannot do,’ said the countess, levelling her eyeglass at the perpetual curate as he stood alone on the side terrace, leading to the back of the house, watching all that was going on, but watching as one who had neither part nor lot in the matter. No place for him, apparently, amongst the pretty little groups that were nestled like posies here and there in the green recesses of shrubbery and lawn, and with whom the vicars of Cove and Perry Point seemed so popular.

Miss Pentwistle replied, with an air of indifference,

‘I believe he can do almost everything but preach a decent sermon.’

‘Nay, then, you are wrong there,’ said the countess. ‘The bishop was telling me only the other day that he will shake us all out of our slippers some of these days. There is more in him than people give him credit for.’

‘Does the bishop say that?’ put in Lady Lowater. ‘Then I am afraid we shall not keep him here much longer. I have always had my fears that he would be sent off some time to elevate what they call the masses. He is too good for a set of sleepy heads like ourselves. And he doesn’t know his own value. He gives you sovereigns and five-pound notes, just as if they were dirty halfpence that one might pick up anywhere. But I am sure, if the bishop has found him out, he is on his way to promotion. Who are you going to gather

up, Miss Pentwistle? You said we must have a congregation for him.'

'Well, I told Mrs. Mortimer she must come with us, and Lady Belleray is dying to see the old carvings, and Mrs. Petipase asked if we could find room for her, and then there is the bishop's wife, and there is Lady Evelyn—they always want to see anything of that sort—and the Dolling-brokes. If you will just come leisurely on, I will go and tell them Mr. Rock is ready.'

Which Miss Pentwistle did, and then the whole party started in the direction of the kitchens.

She had certainly succeeded in getting together a distinguished group to witness Mrs. Antony's discomfiture. Almost all the best people on the ground were picked up, one by one, so that, before the court-yard was reached, Mr. Rock, had he been a

vain little man, might well have congratulated himself upon the interest he was exciting in the feminine and aristocratic mind. As for Mrs. Antony, she was charmed, because, with the single exception of Mrs. Petipase, she was the only outsider who had been admitted to the select circle. She moved and smiled and dispensed her graceful little flatteries with the ease of a woman who is not only conscious of being charmingly dressed, but who feels also that she is breathing her native atmosphere of refinement. Lady Lowater, Lady Belleray, the Countess Much-marsh, Maud Dollingbroke the Honourable, and her sister Gertrude the equally Honourable, Mrs. Murray-Mortimer—double names were Mrs. Antony's delight—and the bishop's wife and Lady Evelyn; they were all her peers, and she flitted from one to another with the apparent careless-

ness of a butterfly who knows that all the flowers in the garden have been made for its own special gratification.

Apparent, but every flutter had been arranged beforehand, and was the result of a carefully prepared plan. The Murray-Mortimers must see that she was in society, and that they need not be afraid of asking her to dinner; so she took the opportunity, when Mrs. Mortimer was within hearing, to converse with Lady Belleray in such a manner as to convey the impression that the Belleray family and herself had ideas and interests in common; that they were in fact quite on a footing of intimacy. And this she did so effectually that Mrs. Mortimer decided to invite her next time they had a formal party. Then the Dollingbrokes did ask the Elms people to dinner, but only to meet quite a second-rate set, as Mrs. An-

tony quickly discovered. Accordingly, when Maud Dollingbroke the Honourable was so near that the fringe of her parasol got entangled in Mrs. Antony's necklet, that lady contrived to be carrying on an easy dialogue with the very countess herself, on the subject of the antiquities they were going to see. So that the mistress of Perry Point Hall, next time she assembled her friends and neighbours for turtle soup, need not fear to include the solicitor and his wife amongst the best of them. A fact which Mrs. Dollingbroke also noted and determined to act on accordingly.

Mr. Antony, full of satisfaction at the success of his elegant bride, was of the party, though basking at a distance from aristocratic smiles. In fact, he was quite on the outskirts, having fallen back to exchange a few words with Miss Pent-

wistle, who, now that everything was in train for the fulfilment of her purposes, kept well in the rear for awhile.

'I have not had time to hear the result of your visit,' he said. 'I understand you only returned yesterday, or I would have made a special call for the purpose. I think I need scarcely ask if you have been successful.'

'Quite successful,' said Miss Pentwistle, briskly. 'In fact I may say I have found out everything that is really necessary. The whereabouts of old Ben Dyson's daughter, Libbie, is ascertained beyond a doubt.'

'And she is in a position to support her father, I suppose,' said the lawyer.

'Quite so, Mr. Antony. She is occupying a most respectable position in society.'

'The unprincipled woman! Then you

see we were quite justified in having the inquiries prosecuted. Scandalous, is it not, Miss Pentwistle, that such neglect should exist ?'

Miss Pentwistle, glancing at Mrs. Anthony in all the glories of creamy pink muslin and any quantity of tulle, chatting with the countess and Lady Belleray, allowed that it *was* scandalous.

'I understand,' the solicitor continued, 'that Lady Lowater has herself undertaken the payment of the old man's weekly stipend. Most kind of her, but at the same time it was in the highest degree advisable that the investigation should be proceeded with. In my position as one of the guardians, I thought it my duty to urge it, as it might be a check upon misappropriation of public funds in other cases. Nothing is ever lost by strict integrity on the part of those charged with

the distribution of parochial charities.'

'I hope not,' said Miss Pentwistle, with a judicious reserve of doubt as to the application of that principle in regard to Mr. Antony's own personal experience before long.

In the heat of her righteous anger against the fascinating adventuress, who was carrying things so successfully just now, she had not taken much account of how the exposure would affect her own former admirer. But, if she wished to revenge herself for the slight he had passed upon her by taking to him, in spite of her gentle hints that she was ready to reconsider her opinion, another lady as wife, her triumph was at hand. Poor little man ! She was already beginning to feel very sorry for him, so polite, and pompous, and complimentary as he was.

They had now reached an old gateway leading into the courtyard.

‘Thank you, Miss Pentwistle, I do not think I will go any further. I am no antiquarian. And, in fact, I have seen this part of the place so often—when looking after the game, and so forth—that it has rather lost its attractions for me. I will return and see how the croquet-players are getting on. But you will let me know at your earliest convenience the result of the inquiries you have made? I should like to be able to lay it before the Board of Guardians at their next meeting.’

‘Certainly, Mr. Antony. If you like, you shall have copies of the marriage certificates; and I will send you the addresses of the different people from whom I have obtained my information. I believe you will find everything correct. I

have spared neither pains nor trouble in conducting the inquiries.'

The solicitor bowed.

'We are very much indebted to you,' he replied, with suitable parochial importance. 'You have shown most praiseworthy promptitude in your course of action. Perhaps, to-morrow, then, I may step in, and look through the evidence with you.'

'Whenever you like, Mr. Antony. Or, if you would prefer it, you can have the papers, and look them over with Mr. Rock. But I think I must go now and gather up our people a little. You see, the professor of archaeology is so absorbed in his subject that he would go on talking about it whether there was anyone to listen or not. I shall perhaps see you again before we disperse.'

CHAPTER VI.

WITH a courteous farewell—for she could afford to be polite to the solicitor now—Miss Pentwistle stepped forward, and collected the scattered ladies into a group.

‘We must come this way,’ she said. ‘Yonder is Mr. Rock, already with his note-book. It would be a pity to miss anything he can tell us.’

And she went before them into the courtyard, Lady Evelyn and the bishop’s wife being a little in advance, with the curate.

It was a curious collection of tumble-down buildings amongst which they found

themselves. Little had been done to the place in the way of repairs for the last fifty years. The nature of the stone and the moisture of the atmosphere were alike favourable to the growth of such vegetation as gives a charm to ruin and decay. Fragments of coping-stone, some of them deeply corniced and carved, had fallen from the old walls. From the gaps which they had left, hung masses of fern and ivy; and snapdragons, now a glory of gold and crimson, shot up from every crevice where they had been able to strike their roots. Iron gates, marvels of hand-wrought scroll-work, had been suffered to drop from their rusty hinges, and hung loosely now beside the lichenized stone pillars, trailed over with briony and gleaming purple clusters of night-shade. Mosses, olive, russet and yellow, dappled the walls; fruit-trees, for years unpruned and un-

tended—for no one ever came upon them there—had worked their hoary branches through cracks and crevices in the masonry. Nature had been left to have its own way, and had made the place beautiful with its own fine craft; so beautiful that now Lady Lowater would let no other hand meddle with it. Thither she would go sometimes to think her own thoughts, but with no other companions.

‘Sweetly pretty, is it not?’ said Mrs. Antony to Lady Belleray. ‘If only one had imagination enough, one could make such a delicious story out of it. Do you know, I always feel as if I ought to be able to write a story when I come here.’

‘I have no doubt you could,’ said Mrs. Petipase, who was being very much dropped by the solicitor’s wife this afternoon, but who, nevertheless, did continue to edge in a remark now and then, to

show that she was not in altogether strange company. ‘It was here that you set us right when we got into such a muddle the week before last. What an admirable memory you must have! I am sure to me, amongst all the ruin and rubbish, one gate looks just the same as another, but you went to the right one as if by instinct.’

Mrs. Antony merely replied by a careless turn of her head in Mrs. Petipase’s direction, speaking all the time to the more desirable Lady Belleray.

‘There is always something in fallen coping-stones and bits of mossy carving which gives me a sort of inspiration. They recall the past so vividly. One seems as if one could conjure up such pictures of bygone days.’

‘Ah! yes,’ said Miss Pentwistle. ‘I have no doubt you could. How I should

like to listen to some of your recollections of the place.'

'Recollections!' said the countess, who had just come up behind them. 'Dear me, I did not know Mrs. Antony had ever been here before. How very interesting! Do let us hear something.'

'Oh!' said Mrs. Petipase the irrepressible, who thought she had as good a right to talk as anybody, 'I did not understand it was a real visit. I thought it was clairvoyance. Did you not tell us it was clairvoyance, Miss Pentwistle?'

'I told you Mrs. Antony *said* it was clairvoyance,' said Miss Pentwistle, with reservation; 'but there may have been a misunderstanding. At the same time, I believe Mrs. Antony *has* been here before, and, if so, I am sure she will be able to remember the curious carvings Mr. Rock is about to explain to us. Mrs. Antony—'

And Miss Pentwistle smiled graciously upon the lawyer's wife, but somehow there was a chilly meaning in the smile.

'Can you not help us here? I must say that my own memory quite fails me. I so seldom come into this part of the premises. I am sure you must be better acquainted with them.'

Miss Pentwistle fell back a little, and said, in a clear, distinct voice,

'Do lead the way, if you please.'

The pretty, mingled mass of creamy muslin, floating drapery, and fluffy hair fell back too, and Mrs. Antony replied, with a graceful gesture,

'Oh! dear, Miss Pentwistle, not on any account. Pray, go on yourself. I could not think of usurping your place. It is so delightful to feel that you are able to tell us everything.'

'I will tell you as much as I know,'

said Miss Pentwistle, still with the same polite smile and benignant urbanity of manner, as she advanced nearer to the consummation of her revenge. ‘But really I do not profess to have a perfect acquaintance myself with the mysteries of this side of the house. I was thinking, Mrs. Antony, your memory might have been so useful to us.’

The countess looked perplexed, Lady Lowater bored, Mrs. Petipase eager, Mrs. Murray-Mortimer suspicious, Lady Belle-ray a trifle tired with the whole thing. Miss Pentwistle went forward, pushed open a creaking old door, and they passed across a courtyard, green with mosses which had sprung out wherever the water dripped from the broken spouts, shadowed with great glossy trailings of ivy, which caught here and there a chance gleam from the slanting sunlight upon their leaves.

‘It is perfectly lovely,’ said Mrs. Petipase, who thought she was really pleasing Mrs. Antony by so frequently referring to her supposed familiarity with the place. ‘How you must have enjoyed coming here. It must have been so delightful, was it not?’

Mrs. Antony was obliged to reply, for the countess’s large, mild, meditative blue eyes were beginning to take an expression of leisurely wonder. And Lady Belleray, too, was seeming interested. Fortunately Lady Lowater was in the background, talking to the dean’s wife.

‘Did you not very often come, Mrs. Antony? And did you ever really begin to write a story about it?’

‘Oh! well, yes, I daresay I did come as often as I could, only you know I always had rather an uncomfortable feeling about ghosts. And then one was not

exactly supposed to find one's way to this part of the house. It was more the servants' property. And——'

Mrs. Antony began to feel slightly uncomfortable. Miss Pentwistle was looking at her in such a very marked manner. And she felt more uncomfortable when that lady said, slowly and expressively, still almost transfixing her with a stare of scientific inquiry,

'I fancy the scullery maids must have found this a very pleasant place for washing-up the dishes, about twenty years ago, or a little more. Was that about the time when you were familiar with the place, Mrs. Antony?'

Miss Pentwistle's look was, under the circumstances, impertinent. It was more than impertinent, it was insolent. But Mrs. Antony felt that to take any notice of it would be fatal. Not hon-

esty but unconsciousness was the best policy.

‘I really cannot remember the exact time. As I have said sometimes to people who have asked me about it, my whole life so far back appears vague to me. I always feel as if I would rather not speak about it.’

‘I can quite understand that,’ said Miss Pentwistle, pointedly. ‘And perhaps the premises were in a better state of repair when you had to visit them so frequently. But you did say, I think, even then they aroused in you an intense desire to write a story about them.’

Lady Belleray put on her eyeglasses, having a dim idea that they would help her to understand what was going on. The countess seemed mildly unreceptive. Mrs. Mortimer began to look eagerly suspicious, remembering what she had heard

at the last garden-party. Mrs. Antony was still endeavouring, and with tolerable success, to preserve a graceful smiling exterior. Miss Pentwistle alone was mistress of the situation.

‘I think we will go through into the back kitchen,’ she continued, addressing herself so directly to Mrs. Antony that the unfortunate lady was unable without manifest rudeness to fall into the background. ‘You said, did you not, that you were particularly anxious to see that piece of old carving over the sink? I *think* it is over the sink, but probably you remember it much better than I do. I must apologise to the other ladies,’ and Miss Pentwistle turned to them with a glance which brought them all forward. ‘I ought to apologise to you for bringing you into regions which, as Mrs. Antony very justly remarks, are generally left to

the servants ; but I think I understood the countess that she was very anxious to see the coat-of-arms. Are you not, dear Lady Muchmarsh ?'

'Anxious ? Of course I am. It is just what we have come into these queer places for, and I do not mean to go away until I have had my curiosity gratified. Where is Mr. Rock ?'

'Mr. Rock,' said Lady Belleray, 'do come. I am sure there are plenty of old stones and things here for the lecture to begin upon. Miss Pentwistle says Mrs. Antony knows more about the back-kitchen than she does, but nobody seems able to say anything definite, and we are all getting into a state of mystification.'

Mr. Rock came, bringing Lady Lowater with him. Mrs. Antony was now in the midst of what she loved so dearly, aristocratic surroundings.

‘Mr. Rock,’ said the Honourable Maud Dollingbroke, ‘is it true that King Charles II. really stayed for a week in that little room just over where the sink is? What a vagrant that poor man must have been! I don’t think I ever visited an old hall throughout the length and breadth of the kingdom without being told that he had passed a night there some time or other. He must have slept in as many beds as Queen Elizabeth or Mary of Scotland.’

‘I believe,’ said the curate, ‘the fact is beyond dispute that he did once take refuge at Lowater Court, this room being then very difficult of access.’

‘Nay, indeed,’ said Lady Belleray, ‘you need not say *then*; I am sure it—or, at any rate, the places that lead to it—are difficult enough of access now.’

‘Not so very difficult,’ put in Miss Pentwistle. ‘Mrs. Antony came straight

to the very door of the courtyard only the last garden-party, and opened the most out-of-the-way latch in the whole place without the slightest hesitation.'

'Ah, but clairvoyance,' suggested Mrs. Petipase. '*Was* it clairvoyance, Mrs. Antony?'

But Mrs. Antony, listening with rapt attention to the words of wisdom which fell from Mr. Rock's lips, gave no heed. The curate proceeded.

'This room being very difficult of access, it would probably be chosen as his hiding-place. I quite believe that he was here for some time. And it is known beyond a doubt that the Duke of Monmouth was here in hiding for some weeks after the battle which decided his fate. But the carvings we want to see have no connection either with King Charles or the duke.

One of the most interesting is this, just under the casement window of what is now the second kitchen, in olden times the scullion's room. You should come a little nearer to see the exceeding fineness of the diaper-work upon the shield.'

Lady Belleray was coming forward. Mrs. Antony, who stood near the piece of carving, fell back a step or two.

'Oh! no, no,' said Lady Belleray, courteously. 'Do not let me prevent you from seeing it, too. I am sure you must feel as much interested as myself.'

But Mrs. Antony, smiling into the face of county rank, still held back.

Then Miss Pentwistle, looking at her fixedly for a few seconds, said, with much deliberation,

'I have no doubt this is not the first time you have seen it, Mrs. Antony.'

And then, without waiting for a reply, she turned to the general company and remarked,

‘This has been, for about twenty-five years, the back-kitchen of the house. The scullery-maids wash up the dishes here. Do not be afraid of coming forward, Mrs. Antony, it must be interesting for you to make acquaintance with the place again after so many years of absence.’

Mrs. Antony knew now that all was over. She felt herself turning white behind her pearl powder and tulle, but she was not going to let Miss Pentwistle see that she was crushed.

‘Thank you very much. It is, as you say, excessively interesting. Such fineness of workmanship and beauty of design. Is there anything else, Mr. Rock, in this part of the building?’

‘Nothing else of so much interest,’ said

that gentleman, unsuspiciously. ‘There is some fine oak-carving in the corridor leading to the justice-room, and at the north end of the house there are some tolerably good remains of dog’s tooth moulding. Perhaps Lady Muchmarsh would like to see them.’

‘By all means,’ said her ladyship, ‘I am just in the mood this afternoon for seeing everything that there is to be seen. It is a thousand pities, Mr. Rock, you do not persuade the Society to come here, the place seems to have so many associations. But I am afraid we are taking up too much of your time. Miss Pentwistle, do you think we ought to trespass upon Mr. Rock’s kindness any further?’

‘I am sure Mr. Rock is delighted,’ said Miss Pentwistle, with great alacrity. ‘I know he enjoys nothing more than going over these old parts of the Court. It is

much pleasanter to you now, is it not, Mr. Rock, than being among the young people on the croquet-lawn ?'

Mr. Rock was able to answer truthfully in the affirmative.

' Ah ! you see I was right. But there is no need for us all to remain.'

And Miss Pentwistle turned to her victim.

' Perhaps you would like to go back to the grounds, Mrs. Antony. I daresay the corridors and galleries in the other part of the house have not for you the charm of association like this picturesque old sink. Do you think your memory will serve you to retrace your steps through the back premises, or shall I be your guide, whilst Mr. Rock shows Lady Belleray what else there is of interest ?'

' Thank you,' said Mrs. Antony, still without any perceptible failure in her usual elegant self-possession, though she

felt she was a ruined woman, so far as Lowater Court could do anything for her. 'I can quite easily find my way alone. And,' she continued, turning gracefully towards Lady Lowater, who was a little in the background, 'perhaps you will allow me to take my leave now. Mr. Antony promised to accompany me for a few calls before we return home.'

Lady Lowater, who had not understood the by-play, extended her hand.

'I am sorry you are obliged to leave us so soon. I believe the young people talk about having dancing upon the lawn. Can you not stay?'

'Many thanks. I am afraid not this afternoon. You see, I so seldom have the pleasure of Mr. Antony's company in my drives. And thank you, Mr. Rock, for the charming treat you have given us. It has been *so* interesting.'

And with a bow of general leave-taking, which included even Miss Pentwistle in its graciousness, Mrs. Antony made her way through the too familiar back-yards of Lowater Court to the croquet-ground, where her husband was watching the players.

'My dear,' she said to him, 'I have made our excuses to Lady Lowater, as I want to get away early. Take me home at once. That horrible old creature, Miss Pentwistle, has been dragging us all over the kitchens and places; and, if everyone of us does not take fever, it will be a mercy. The woman is a perfect bore.'

'But I had engaged to play croquet in the same set with Sir Merrion,' mildly suggested the husband.

'That is of no consequence, my dear. I have explained everything to Lady Lowater. Please have the carriage brought

up at once, and let us slip quietly away. I feel as if I should never get rid of the smell of drains. Such a nuisance to be hauled about amongst those low places. *Will you take me home at once, please?*'

That 'will' was very decided. Mr. Antony knew he had better give in. And he went to look after the carriage, though he would much rather have paid a second visit to the refreshment-tent, where the butler was preparing champagne-cup for the guests.

CHAPTER VII.

THE carved oak in the corridor and the dog-tooth moulding at the north end of the Court were soon disposed of; and then leaving Mr. Rock and Lady Lowater, who were as yet ignorant of the state of affairs, to talk over Ben Dyson's allowance, Miss Pentwistle brought the rest of the party round by one of the plantation-paths to the croquet-lawn.

She made the walk exceedingly interesting to them by relating all the particulars of her visit to Crumbleby, together with Mrs. Porringer's information, and the additional items supplied by the sister

at Portsmouth. She had only that morning put everything down upon paper, so that her statement was perfectly clear and straightforward, leaving no doubt whatever as to the previous history of the lady who had been so courteously received into their select midst. The information, of course, spread rapidly. Each lady carried it to her own little knot of friends upon the ground, and, before the party broke up, everyone knew as much as Miss Pentwistle herself about what had taken place.

Mrs. Antony's own behaviour, too, gave a fine finish to the excitement; for she had previously engaged to go through the fern-houses with Mrs. Dollingbroke after Mr. Rock's explanations should be over; and Colonel Pontifex, to whom she had promised a quadrille, was going about amongst the ladies with an amusing ex-

pression of discomfiture upon his face, searching in vain for the creamy flounces and cloudy tulle of his partner.

'Gone home with a headache,' was all the explanation he could get at first; but the story was soon re-told for his benefit. And from him all the rest of the Byborough officers learned it as they discussed champagne-cup in the refreshment-tent. Mrs. Antony and the pert little scullery-girl, who had been sent away from the Court five-and-twenty years before for flirting with old Sir Guy, were one and the same person.

After the last of the guests had departed, Miss Pentwistle sought out Valence Dormer, who had kept very much in the background all the afternoon, and in consequence had not heard any of the whisperings. She asked the young girl to take a stroll with her before

dinner, up towards the rock-seat, and explained the state of affairs.

‘I am so sorry, dear Miss Dorner,’ she began, ‘to be the bearer of such disagreeable tidings, but you must know sooner or later, and I thought it would be kinder perhaps to tell you at once what I have heard during my visit to Crumbleby. You know I went at the joint request of Mr. Antony and Mr. Rock, to ascertain, if possible, some particulars relative to Ben Dyson’s daughter.’

‘Yes, I remember,’ said Valence; ‘the one who married very well some years ago, and Mr. Antony thought she ought to be made to do something for her father.’

‘Exactly.’

‘And I think she ought, too, though poor old Dyson says he would rather die than take a penny from her. Have you found out whether she is living?’

'I am sorry to say I have, Miss Dormer, and she proves to be Mrs. Antony herself.'

And then Miss Pentwistle gave a broad, general sketch of the whole affair, omitting, however, those little spiteful touches which added such piquancy to the story as heard by Lady Belleray and the rest of the great people in the plantation walk.

Valence listened with at first a curious feeling of separateness from the history. It sounded to her like a piece of evidence delivered in a court of justice. She did not for some time realise it in any other light. Not until Miss Pentwistle began to wind-up with expressions of sympathy did the fact dawn upon her that this was a thing which touched herself personally.

'I am so sorry for you, dear Miss Dormer, so very sorry. But I knew that you must hear all about it from somebody, and I thought it would be more satisfactory

to have your information from the fountain head. I assure you I have told you the plain, unvarnished truth. The proofs, if you should care to see them, are all written out, as Mr. Antony wished to lay them before the poor-law guardians. Of course he will not do that now. I am so very grieved.'

'Tell me again,' said Valence, quietly.
'It has not made itself quite clear to me.'

And then Miss Pentwistle repeated the whole story, Valence listening this time with intelligence of how the details must affect her own life, her own conduct. She was not incredulous. The thing did not smite upon her as a wild fabrication. She could match it with too much from her own personal observation. It was only a fine elaboration of her mother's general scheme of conduct. But she was silent. She would express no opinion.

'I do not blame you in the least, dear Miss Dormer,' said Miss Pentwistle, kindly. 'Do not for a moment think that I have any such intention.'

'Of course I don't,' said Valence, simply. 'How could I think you are blaming me, when this is the first word I have ever heard about the circumstances? I have had nothing to do with them.'

'Dear me! is it possible? And Mrs. Antony has never given you the least hint. How very curious! She must be a woman of remarkable ability to have carried on the—the—'

'I should prefer not discussing mamma's part in the matter until I have heard her own version of it, Miss Pentwistle. Instead of returning with you for dinner now, I will go to the Elms and ask mamma all about it.'

'That is very wise, my dear,' said Miss

Pentwistle, who knew well enough that, whatever Mrs. Antony's point of view might be, it could make no difference to the facts of the case. 'It is always best to look at a subject from both sides, before committing oneself to an opinion. I will excuse you to Lady Lowater, or would you like to explain matters to her yourself?'

'No, not now. Just tell her, if you please, that I will come back some time this evening.'

And without more ado Valence went to the Elms.

She found Mrs. Antony lying on the sofa in the drawing-room, surrounded by the usual appliances attendant upon an attack of hysterics; smelling-salts, eau-de-Cologne, fans, vinaigrettes, and etceteras.

'My dear Valence,' she said, in a peevish tone, as the girl came in, 'you are the very

last person in the world that I wish to see just now. You do always remind me so of a case of instruments, and I want to keep myself perfectly quiet for awhile. As I told Mr. Antony, that horrible Miss Pentwistle has been dragging me through the kitchens and back places of the Court until I am positively ill with drain smells. It will be a mercy if I do not have a violent attack of fever.'

'None of the other ladies seemed affected in that way,' replied Valence, 'and I have been there very often myself without perceiving anything unpleasant. I always think the Court is remarkably well-drained.'

'You are not so sensitive as I am, Valence. You appear to be made of cast-iron in the matter of nerves. Now the slightest thing upsets me. My organization is entirely different.'

‘Well, don’t let us talk about our organizations, mamma. I want to ask you about something Miss Pentwistle has been telling me. Is what she has found out really the truth?’

‘I am not aware yet what Miss Pentwistle *has* found out,’ replied Mrs. Antony, with dignity.

‘She says she has found out that you are Ben Dyson’s daughter, and that you lived at the Court five-and-twenty years ago, before old Sir Guy Lowater died.’

‘Miss Pentwistle is an *odious* creature,’ and Mrs. Antony had recourse to the smelling salts. ‘She is a perfect pest in the neighbourhood. I really do not understand why she need trouble herself about my affairs. She is in the highest degree vulgar and impertinent. I beg you will not mention her name again.’

‘I’m sure I do not want to mention it,

mamma, I only want to know the truth. Is Ben Dyson your father, and am I his grand-daughter.'

' Benjamin Dyson *is* my father, Valence. Now I hope you are satisfied. You have nothing to do with anything more than that.'

Valence stood quite still for a few moments.

' Child, will you leave the room ?'

' Not just yet, mamma. I want to know what you are going to do.'

' Going to do ? I shall ask Mr. Antony to take me abroad. Do you suppose I shall stay in this place after that vulgar creature has been insulting me in such a violent and uncalled-for manner ? We shall start immediately for the Continent, and remain there until I feel that I can return with comfort to this country.'

‘And what should you like me to do, mamma?’

‘Whatever you like, my dear. Miss Pentwistle’s abominable insolence has completely swept away my hopes for your future. Of course I cannot expect that Sir Merrion——’

‘Never mind Sir Merrion, mamma. What I have to think about now is my own duty. You have decided to go abroad.’

‘Yes. And I should say you had better return to Hurchester, unless Miss Pentwistle’s malice has already preceded you. I have no doubt now that the woman will rejoice to do us all the harm in her power; sly, undermining creature.’

‘Why is she so malicious, mamma? Are you sure that she is. It was Mr. Antony himself who was anxious for her to make

these inquiries. She only did as she was told. I am very sorry for her.'

' My dear Valence, go away. You and I look at things from such entirely different positions. Miss Pentwistle rejoices in what she considers my downfall, because she once aspired to the position which I now enjoy as Mr. Antony's wife. But she cannot deprive me of that position. Nothing that the odious woman has discovered in the least touches my name and honour. Miss Pentwistle would have done exactly the same herself under the same circumstances, though she has not my talent in rising to the level of whatever station she achieves. Her machinations have succeeded for the present in depriving me of social consideration in this place. But I am Mrs. Antony, and Mrs. Antony I shall remain. If you will kindly leave

me now, I will arrange matters at my leisure.'

And Valence came away.

CHAPTER VIII.

LADY LOWATER was sitting in her own room, thinking, thinking. Miss Pentwistle had told her everything.

That telling had swept away a pleasant vision of the peace which might, after all, come into her weary life. If Merrion once married Valence Dormer, Mr. Antony's hold upon herself would be loosened. His own interests, his own position, would bind him to silence. He could gain nothing by betraying the secret which had blasted all her life. And her boy would be happy, she knew he would. Valence had that in her which would grace

any position. True, she had not the prestige of rank and position, but her father was a gentleman. Her nature, her instincts were refined. She had the intelligence and culture which could rightly use a wealth to which she was not born. She had that activity of mind, that firmness of purpose, which would counterbalance Merrion's easier, more self-indulgent disposition. He would have in her a strong nature to lean upon ; she would have in him, if not intellectual ability, at least those material advantages of money and rank of which she might make such splendid use. Each would complement the deficiencies of the other, and Valence's native vigour of character would soon secure to her, in the circle amongst whom Merrion's wife must move, that consideration which might otherwise have been denied.

But Miss Pentwistle's discoveries had

given a new aspect to everything. Valence Dormer, the hoped-for bride of the lord of Lowater, a scullery-girl's daughter, and that scullery-girl once turned away from the Court for over-familiarity with its master, wicked old Sir Guy. No, it could never be.

Lady Lowater's first feeling, after bitter indignation, was thankfulness that the discovery had come in time to save the family honour from such a stain.

The family honour.

Those three words, as she said them over and over to herself, gave her pause.

She could not go on with the train of thought and purpose which was sweeping Valence Dormer into banishment. Miss Pentwistle had told her, what was indeed true, that the girl knew nothing of her mother's deceit. Then she need not visit upon her that mother's punishment. Va-

lence, the daughter of a scullery-woman, was in her own person and character as much entitled to respect as Valence the daughter of Mr. Antony's wife. She need not love the girl less for another's sin. But to let Merrion make her the lady of Lowater Court, to sully the noble name and honour of the family by alliance with blood so mean !

Then she paused again. She began to ask herself many questions, to ask them as she sat there alone in her room, looking out upon the summer evening sunshine as it flooded those broad acres which had passed from father to son through so many generations. Who was she that she should judge another? And who was this brave son of hers that she should scorn for him to wed one whose birth, lowly though it seemed, was better than his own ?

Should she, by stamping on her own

pride now, atone in some sort for her long past guilt? Should she, by taking this girl, so true a lady at heart, and giving her a mother's kiss for the sake of the love which Merrion bore her, do what she could to repair the wrong her sin had done him? Was this her penance, that as evil deeds of hers lay covered up, unacknowledged, unforgiven, so evil deeds of others were to smite her now, yet not so sorely, not so bitterly? Should she pass by the wrong that had been done to her, but not done by Valence? Should she say to this girl, suffering innocently for the guilt of others, 'I know it all and I will love you.'

'I will,' said the haughty lady of Lowater. And, as she said it, a ray of the golden sunshine from without seemed to enter and pass into her soul.

There was a knock at the door and Valence came in.

Her step was firm as ever, her bearing as upright. There was consciousness neither of shame nor guilt in the clear, straightforward glance of her brown eyes.

'I have come to say good-bye to you, Lady Lowater. It is time for me to go.'

'I know what you mean,' said Lady Lowater, making room for the young girl on the sofa beside her, 'Miss Pentwistle has been telling me all about it. But that does not make it time for you to go.'

Merrion's mother felt just a touch of self-praise as she said this, and took Valence's hand into her own and held it tenderly, more tenderly than many women would have done, knowing all.

'You are to stay here, child, and everything is to be as it was. All that has happened must make no difference to you and to me. I have asked myself what I ought to do, and I have decided.'

My lady was not quite prepared for Valence's reply. The girl looked steadily at her, and then away past lawn and terrace and plantations, to where a curl of blue smoke rose from the woodman's cottage.

'I also have asked myself what I ought to do,' she said, 'and I have decided.'

'Decided what, Valence?'

'That I must go away.'

'Ah! you mean back to Hurchester. I thought you would say that.'

'No, not to Hurchester. There is other work for me now, than that. I must go and live with my grandfather.'

'Your grandfather, child. I never knew you had a grandfather living. Where is he?'

'Lady Lowater, if Mrs. Antony is my mother, old Ben Dyson is my grandfather. All that I can do for him now, it is my

duty to do. I shall go and live with him.'

'Valence child, what are you thinking about?'

'Of doing what is just. At least that is what I want to do. Mamma says she is going away immediately with Mr. Antony, to live abroad for some time, so there is nothing to prevent me from taking my affairs into my own hands. I have only come now to say good-bye to you. I shall never forget how good you have been to me.'

For awhile Lady Lowater could find no words. Valence Dormer, the girl she had desired as a wife for her son, going to live with the old woodcutter, and to work for him with her own hands as Margaret had done; to be a labourer's daughter in fact, like the hard-handed, rough-voiced women who sat by dozens in their Sunday best at the bottom of the church, separated by an

impassable gulf from those with whom her own ladyhood could clasp hands. Valence do this? nay, never. Lady Lowater could bear much, but to stoop so low for a wife for her son, that could not be.

‘You must wait, child, until we have had some conversation about it. I cannot allow you to throw yourself away in that foolish manner.’

Valence looked at her.

‘Lady Lowater, *you* call it foolish! I thought it was yourself who told Miss Pentwistle once that there was no religion but the doing of one’s duty.’

‘Well, so I did, child; but there is duty to oneself as well as duty to one’s neighbour.’

‘And duty to oneself is to do the thing which gives one the right to respect oneself.’

Lady Lowater turned away. Respect

for oneself. Never any more of that for her now. One could but cover up the past, not in any sort put it away. She had made herself believe long ago that there was no other way but silence. That other people should not know, that was all she hoped for. And then she was not hiding the truth for her own sake ; it was to save her only child from ruin and disgrace. Let the world whip her with its scorn, even to death, but let him be saved. And his honour was fast bound with hers. In her shame he must perish. To keep the sunshine in his life, might she not carry her sad secret to the grave, forgiven at last, perchance, by Him who knew how she had suffered for her sin ?

That one should be able to 'respect oneself.' What a mockery ! And yet she had thought of putting her pride aside, of being so generous in the matter of the stain which

had come upon Valence's good report. She had even gone to the length of praising herself forsooth, as one who could do so nobly. But let it pass.

‘Valence,’ she said, ‘you are a brave girl; you will do what is right when you know it. But you must give yourself time to become accustomed to a new light upon anything. You cannot see, all at once, what is required of you. Stay here for a day or two. If what has happened does not touch me, it need touch no one else. Give me the right to be a mother to you, for the present. You shall do what you think best in the end. Only one day.’

‘No, Lady Lowater, not even only one day. Am I to sit at your table in ease and luxury, whilst my grandfather wants for his daily bread? And am I to be waited upon by your liveried servants, whilst he has not one of his own kith and kin to put

a morsel of food into his lips? Is this the Valence Dormer you have been so good to, this girl who will take the sweet for herself and leave the bitter for others?

Valence had stood up as she spoke. She had said what she had to say and she was ready to go. Lady Lowater looked at her there, so simple in her innocent dignity, and she felt that this girl, let her take her place with clowns or peasants if she would, was as noble as any woman who had ever stepped amongst the ladies of Lowater Court. Truly Merrion would not stoop so far to lift her to his side.

‘Well, Valence, there is reason in what you say. As regards Mrs. Antony, that need not weigh with either of us for one moment. She has only kept from you what she has kept from everyone else. And you may be right in thinking that it is laid upon you to do what she has left un-

done. But that need not keep you from staying with me. You shall spend as much time as ever you like with Dyson—I beg pardon—with your grandfather.'

'Nay, call him Dyson,' said Valence. 'He is only now what he has always been. It is I who have changed.'

'I shall call him your grandfather. You shall wait upon him and work for him, just as you did for Margaret. You shall go to him as often as you like, and stay as long as you like. You could do no more if you were actually living at the cottage.'

'It is not that sort of thing,' said Valence, quietly. 'It is not going to see him for a few hours every day, and speaking a few kind words, and seeing that he is properly cared for in the matter of food and clothing. I must go and live in his house, and be to him as a daughter. That is what I mean. He must know that I am

there, always at his call, not doing what I do for kindness' sake, but because it is my simple duty to do it. That is what I have to do, and you must not try to keep me from it.'

Lady Lowater looked at the girl. She carried herself with an almost royal independence, bright, clear-eyed, and yet so unconscious. Truly she needed nothing that externals could give, to make her as much a lady as the best of them. But Valence go and make her home in that little thatched cottage, and harden her hands with rough household work, and surround herself with the mean belongings of a peasant's home? It was impossible. And yet Lady Lowater, crusted over as she was with the prejudices of her class, hemmed in with the trammels and conventions of rank, felt that it would be a noble thing to do. Alas! had she not

herself, only the world knew not of it, broken through the trammels and conventions to a far sadder ending?

‘Valence, it sounds very beautiful, but I am afraid you will never be able to do it. You cannot bring your life down to such a level. You look at it from the outside, and there is a haze of romance about it ; but, when it comes to the petty details of every day, your courage cannot but fail. You do not know what you are undertaking.’

‘Let me try,’ Valence said, ‘and then tell me that I cannot do it. It is not rush-bottomed chairs and deal tables and stone floors and a thatched roof that decide whether one is a lady or not. I have never been able to feel that such things made any difference to me. I respected myself quite as much when I was in the Hurchester hospital, with an apron and a

cap, as I have done since I came here amongst all your beautiful things. So long as I may think my own thoughts and do my own work, I want nothing else to make a lady of me.'

There was just a touch of pride in Valence's voice, which made Lady Lowater feel she could not say any more. She had been thinking it was a kindness to the girl to offer her the luxuries and refinements of an old ancestral home; but these did not count for much with that native nobleness of mind which made its own content. Valence's wants were of a simple kind, leave to think her own thoughts and do her own work. Well for her that she could find her happiness so. For to some the thinking of their own thoughts was the saddest thing of all.

'Well, Valence,' she said, wearily, 'you must have it your own way. I will say

no more. But will you only leave your decision until to-morrow morning ?'

For Lady Lowater had had no time as yet even to see Sir Merrion and learn what he thought about the sudden turn of affairs.

'Thank you very much, but my decision is quite made now. I am going to my grandfather this evening. You will find me there whenever you want me.'

CHAPTER IX.

LADY LOWATER need not have troubled herself about what Sir Merrion would think. Valence had not been gone an hour. My lady was dressed for dinner, and had again gone into her own little boudoir, to be free from Miss Pentwistle's stream of information, when the young man himself knocked at the door.

‘I say, little mother,’ he said, stretching himself at full length in the cushioned window-seat, ‘what a nuisance this is. Miss Pentwistle got hold of me down in the drawing-room and would not let me

go until she had told me the whole story. Got copies of the marriage certificates and everything, you know, so there can't be a doubt about it. I suppose she has told you, too.'

'Yes, Merrion. It does not take long for ill news to travel.'

And that was all Lady Lowater said, for she wanted to know her son's mind first.

'It's no end of a nuisance, mother. And just when I had made up my mind what to do, and there was nothing left but to tell her.'

'You can tell her now, Merrion,' said his mother. 'Valence is just what she was yesterday at this time; she has done no wrong that I know of.'

'Oh! come, I say, ma!' and the young man gave himself a careless shake, 'that is putting it a little bit too strongly. What!

you encourage me to make an offer to the daughter of a woman who used to be your own scullery-maid? I did not come expecting to hear that, at any rate.'

'If Valence is the girl you love, and if you believe her to be a lady in her own right—that is, a lady at heart—I do not in the least care whose daughter she is, Merrion.'

The young man got up and stretched himself, and turned so that he could see his mother's face.

'Jove! you don't say it. Why, I thought I should have found you in a regular fever of indignation, and here you are as calm and as cool as if nothing had happened. I declare it gave me a regular knock-over, just at first. I am very sorry for her, 'pon my word I am; but as for marrying her—well, no, I am not prepared to go quite so far as that.'

Lady Lowater looked at her son, tall, handsome, manly, standing on the very spot of carpet where Valence had stood an hour before, his face expressing, in its masculine beauty, what was supposed to be all the pride of all the Lowaters—pride which was of quite a different kind from Valence's, as became the representative of so noble a house.

‘If Valence is the daughter of an unprincipled woman, Merrion, she is also the daughter of a soldier and a gentleman. Her father served in your own regiment.’

‘Yes; I don't deny she has good blood in her veins on that side. Of course it's a great pull when one's father is a gentleman, but all the same the thing is no end of a nuisance. Miss Pentwistle says it is in everybody's mouth.’

‘Yes, and will be for five minutes.’

‘You mean to say that it will blow

over. I am not so sure of that. You know the woman has sold us all shamefully, and here at our very doors. It isn't as if she were some good-for-nothing baggage from a distance. And then to think of taking her daughter into the family. After all, one does owe something to one's name.'

'When it is a good one,' said her ladyship, 'certainly. But, I believe, amongst the portraits in the long drawing-room you will find some that do not stand upon a better background than Mrs. Antony. I have heard that your great-grandfather married more for beauty than anything else.'

'You mean Lady Bessie, in blue satin, with the silver stars. Ah! but she *was* good-looking. Jove! *what* a pair of eyes! and with that sort of way about her that carries off everything, even in a picture.'

And her grandfather hawked fish about, didn't he?'

'So the family records say.'

'And we don't seem to be any worse for it. But I daresay my poor old great-grandfather often had it flung in his face; and a man doesn't like that. And then you see, mother, as I said, being in the place makes such a difference. Now, Lady Bessie came from nobody knows where, and, being a clever woman, she managed to keep things quiet. And beauty does go a long way, especially that sort of beauty which knows all about itself.'

'Well, Merrion, what is the end of it?'

'Just this, ma. I've made up my mind to go back with the *Arethusa*. She sails next week. You know there never was any time fixed, so that people won't need to ask questions. And they say we're likely to be sent up to the hills, so I

shall get plenty of fun. Of course it's a tremendous bore for a fellow, but you needn't trouble about me. I'm not going to kill myself over it.'

Lady Lowater was not afraid of that now.

'And besides, it's ever so much better than if I'd spoken. One would have felt awkward, rather, at drawing back when it had got to that length ; and yet, what else would there have been for it ? People couldn't have blamed one, under the circumstances, could they ?'

For the first time, a feeling of thankfulness came into Lady Lowater's mind. If this was to be the way, then better far that the word had not been spoken. But, of the two sorts of pride, how far nobler was Valence Dormer's. She was silent. Still she could not help being proud of her boy. He was so brave, and

strong, and cheery, spite of a disappointment which would have soured many a young man. There was not a touch of bitterness about him. And, things being as they were, perhaps it was better he should go away. To remain at home, under present circumstances, would most likely mean to quarrel with Mr. Antony, and, at all cost, that must be avoided. For herself, she must go back from this fair-promising, momentary gleam of sunshine to the loneliness which she had borne so long, which she must bear now to the end.

‘Have you had a talk with her, mother, since it all came out?’

‘I have, Merrion. Have you?’

‘Well, no, not exactly. I met her as I was coming up here, and she smiled quite pleasantly, and so did I; for, of course, I wasn’t going to seem as if anything

disagreeable had happened. But I didn't stop. One feels so awkward when one doesn't quite know what sort of ground to take. She told me she was going to old Dyson's.'

'Yes, Merrion; and she might have told you more than that. She might have told you that she is going to live with him, to take care of him, and nurse him to his death, just as his own daughter, Mrs. Antony, ought to have done.'

Merrion gave a long, low whistle, and then begged his mother's pardon.

'I really forgot where I was. Jove! what a plucky thing for her to do. You don't mean to say, ma, that she's going to live with that old labourer, day in and day out, and eat off his deal table, and clean up the kitchen, and all that sort of thing, just as Margaret used to do?'

‘That is what she intends. I tell her she will never be able to do it.’

‘I should think not. Whatever possesses her?’

‘A sense of duty. She thinks that, as Dyson is her grandfather, she ought to go and take care of him. She is his nearest relative, after Mrs. Antony, you know—and Mrs. Antony is going away.’

‘His nearest relative? Goodness, so she is! I declare I never thought of that. Well, then, mother, that really would have been too much of a good thing. But what a notion! Now I should have said, if she had gone somewhere and earned some money somehow, and then paid somebody to make the old man comfortable, it would have been a great deal nearer the mark.’

‘Valence thinks she ought to do it herself, Merrion. She says you cannot

pay other people to do your own duty.'

'Then that settles it, mother. You couldn't surely want me to say anything to her after that. Why, it might come to be a case of sitting down and doing my courting with a long pipe by the old fellow's kitchen fire. It *is* a good thing I didn't speak when I was so near it that morning in the plantation.'

'I think very likely, Merrion, if you had spoken, Valence would have said you nay. She would perhaps have seen that the love you had to give her was not of the sort to satisfy her.'

'Very likely, little mother. And, if she is so romantic as to go and live in a labourer's hovel for the sake of what she calls her duty, I am pretty sure it would *not* have been of the right sort. I thought it was a confounded nuisance at first, but I'm beginning to see that very likely it

will all turn out for the best. I'm not a bit offended with her, though. I shall always think of her as one of the best girls, take her all round, that ever I came across, and you must tell me every now and then how she is getting on. I shall like to know as much as that. And, if ever a little money would be useful, just do whatever you like, mother, for the old man. You mustn't mix me up in it, for she mightn't like it, being so awfully independent ; but you'll see, won't you, that things are kept square for them both ?'

Lady Lowater promised.

'I think I shall start the day after to-morrow. There are always such heaps of things to get in town, and the *Arethusa* sails the end of the week. And I say, mother, why shouldn't you take a run down to Portsmouth with me ? You won't see a prettier sight anywhere than

the *Arethusa* going out of port, with all her sails spread. Come now. Just a little bit of a shaking-up will do you all the good in the world.'

'I will come, Merrion.'

'That's right. And then, you know, if we do get ordered home after we've been to the hills, as old Pontifex seems to think we have a chance, it won't be much of a good-bye—not more than a couple of years at the most. That isn't much when you're spinning along pleasantly all the time.'

And Sir Merrion went to look up his things.

CHAPTER X.

AGAIN Lady Lowater sat there thinking, thinking.

Ah, well, it was better so. To be left alone was not the worst thing that could happen. With Merrion abroad, there was safety now at home. The last two hours had much shaken the foundations upon which any sort of peace could be built. As yet she had scarcely had time to think what effect this unexpected revelation might have upon Mr. Antony. But she knew well that had Merrion spoken to Valence Dormer, and then drawn back, as

now she found he would have done, no skill of hers could have prevented a quarrel, with all its terrible results both for herself and him. His going away was the only price at which she could buy relief from dread.

And perhaps Valence would never know what had been in his thoughts. And, better still, he might come back and find that she was yet dear to him. And the stare of open-mouthed wonder having worn itself out, and the gossips having found other food, Merrion too might forget, and reach out his hand to the girl, so worthy of all he could give her, and the end would be better than the beginning. However, so it was, that just a week after that last garden-party, the *Arethusa* set sail, with Merrion Lowater on board. His mother watched him from the landing-stage, and, when the vessel was fairly out

to sea, she went back to her rooms, which looked out over the Channel. There she saw the brave ship careering along with all its sails spread, a thing of life upon the dancing sparkling waves, which leaped to kiss its gaily painted bows and then rolled away, leaving them wet to the sunshine.

‘I don’t wonder, my lady,’ said the faithful Jennings, ‘that Sir Merrion wanted you to come. It’s a beautiful sight as ever I saw, and if I’d anybody belonging to me upon it I should be as proud as proud. Things being that he was set to go, he couldn’t have gone with a better promise.’

‘We will hope so,’ said my lady, a stedfast look of hungry, unsatisfied love in her eyes, as she strained them after the lessening sails. ‘But look, Jennings, how red the sunset is; they say that is for storms.’

Jennings only drew the curtains a little, that the glare might not dazzle those longing, wistful eyes.

‘Oh, no, my lady, it’s a different sort from that that brings the winds up. You want more of a wrack about, and like as if the clouds were swept with a besom. When you see it that way, then you may talk of a storm. She’ll get out into the open as quiet as a sleeping babe to-night.’

‘Jennings! Jennings! she is on fire!’

And Lady Lowater started and clenched her thin hands, and the love in her eyes died out to horror.

Jennings only smiled.

‘You’ve had no rest, my lady, these three nights, and it’s shook you so that you’ve got no nerves at all. It’s only the sunset that you said was so red. And red it is, as red as fire, but it’s no more than that, my lady.’

Lady Lowater stepped back with a great sigh of relief. Jennings was right. It was only the crimson glow which the setting sun, looking out from beneath a cloud, wrapped round the *Arethusa* from her ports up to the standard at her mast-head. A glorious, fiery light, which, even as they watched it, died slowly out, leaving the vessel a faint grey stain upon the horizon. And then Jennings went away, but my lady sat there looking over the sea, long after all was shadow and blackness and silence.

Next day she came home, to live her life as she could at Lowater Court.

And now, if Miss Pentwistle wanted things back in their old quietness, she had what she wanted. It seemed almost like a dream that the sound of young voices and the brightness of young life had ever

been known in the house at all, so utterly had the shadow of former times settled down upon the place. Lady Lowater, coming home that late July afternoon, quiet, weary, depressed, brought back with her the old order of things which Valence's presence and Sir Merrion's had for a time put aside. Again in the half-dark of early morning the rabbits came close up to the very windows to nibble the flowers on the terrace beds. Lady Lowater could hear their little pattering feet upon the gravel. And she could hear the wood pigeons in the yew-tree outside--the wood pigeons that had been still for weeks until now, because Sir Merrion's gun had scared them away.

There was no one to scare them now. They could tell their story undisturbed. So could the squirrels, if they had any to tell, that raced up and down the sentinel

elm-trees at the end of the house, or swung themselves in bright-eyed merriment from branch to branch of the tremulous larches. They had it their own way from morning to night, for not a voice nor a footfall but their own disturbed the quietness of the place. The only difference was that my lady now preferred to take her walks alone, instead of with her companion.

‘It is no trouble to me to be left to myself,’ she would say, as Miss Pentwistle, with her shawl and her bonnet-strings and her ringlets and all the rest of her arranged with mathematical precision, came to propose the customary afternoon stroll. ‘Go out as much as ever you like, only let me alone. Keep people outside from troubling me, it is all I ask you for.’

But when Miss Pentwistle had gone, as she generally did go, down to the Cove to

have a little gossip with Mrs. Petipase, or some of the other unemployed women there, Lady Lowater would set out for the plantation, where her feet had worn a track up to the rock-seat. And there she would stay for hours, looking out over the sea eastward, where her boy was sailing. Not sailing with a heart weary and sad as her own, though. A better lot had been cast for him, in that he could meet the world with a smile, whatever it gave him. And the world gave well to those who could give it smiles again.

Then from that rock-seat another track was worn, along the mossy path which wound down the slope of the wood to Ben Dyson's cottage; and Lady Lowater's feet had worn that track too.

Miss Pentwistle was glad to be able to take her walks elsewhere than amongst the undisturbed beauties of Nature. She

loved interchange of thought with her fellow-creatures, and so nothing suited her better than to represent Lady Lowater in endless rounds of afternoon calls, during which Mrs. Antony was, as might have been supposed, the chief subject of conversation. Mrs. Antony herself did not need to be called upon now, having made arrangements to travel on the Continent for an indefinite time.

She and Mr. Antony left the Elms on the very day that Sir Merrion Lowater sailed from Portsmouth in the *Arethusa*. Nobody knew when they were coming back, but everybody knew that when they did return it would be to a very different position from the one they had previously occupied. Lady Belleray settled that by sending a coldly polite note to the lawyer's wife the morning after the garden-party, regretting that the little afternoon-tea at

which she hoped to have received Mr. and Mrs. Antony had been unavoidably given up. Mrs. Murray-Mortimer followed suit by deferring a dinner-party, to which the Elms people had been invited. Finally, when Mrs. Antony went round to make a few calls before starting for the Continent, the Dollingbrokes and the Pontifex ladies, and even Mrs. Crudenay and the vicar's wife of Perry Point, said 'not at home.'

So Miss Pentwistle felt she had had her revenge.

CHAPTER XI.

THE very night of the garden-party Mr. Rock had gone away for a week's holiday, only coming home the morning of Lady Lowater's return from Portsmouth. He got out of the train at Byborough, and, instead of waiting for the coach which did service occasionally between that place and Lowater, shouldered his baggage and started at a good stiff pace for the village.

Reaching the bend in the road from which the church tower first showed itself beyond the thatched roof of Ben Dyson's cottage, he encountered Miss Pentwistle,

not with her tracts this time, but with a card-case in her hand; and from her, the best possible authority upon the subject, he heard all that had happened.

‘Mr. and Mrs. Antony have gone away, Mr. Rock,’ she said, when the general facts of the case had been explained, ‘and I don’t think they could have done anything wiser. I suppose they will stay until things have quieted down a little. I believe the labouring people here would almost have mobbed Mrs. Antony, if she had put her head out of doors, when once it was generally known how she had behaved to that poor old man. I daresay she thinks by-and-by she will be received again into society, but, if so, she is very much mistaken.’

‘Poor Mrs. Antony!’ said the curate.

‘Poor Mrs. Antony, indeed!’ and Miss Pentwistle tossed her head. ‘I think you

had better say poor Mr. Antony. To marry some one whom you understand to be a lady, and to marry her without a penny of fortune, because you expect to raise your own position by her connections, and then to find that you are united for life to an ex-scullery-girl—I do call that something to be pitied about. As for Mrs. Antony, she has got what she married for, a comfortable home and money enough to keep it up with, and she will stick to it through thick and thin. Scullery-girl or no scullery-girl, she is lawfully married to Mr. Antony, and he must keep to his bargain.'

‘Poor Mr. Antony, then.’

‘Yes, I assure you that is a great deal nearer the mark. They say she doesn’t seem a bit broken down by anything that has happened, lords it over him as much as ever, seems to think she is to have her

own way and be knocked under to just as if she were a lady born. Mr. Antony, being a lawyer, ought to know what he can do to help himself, but I do say it is a shame the woman cannot be prosecuted for obtaining goods under false pretences.'

'You see, a husband does not count as goods, whatever a wife does,' said Mr. Rock. 'It is too often the case that he counts as something quite different. However, it is certainly the gentleman who has got the worst of the bargain this time. And Miss Dormer has gone to Hurchester, I suppose?'

'No, indeed, she has done nothing of the sort. She has done the most hair-brained thing anyone could possibly imagine. She has gone to the cottage to take care of old Ben Dyson. Of course, as things have turned out, he is her grandfather—most odd coincidence, isn't it? And, as Mrs.

Antony has washed her hands of any responsibility whatever in the matter, Miss Dormer has undertaken it. She says it is her duty to stay by the old man until he dies.'

'And Miss Dormer will do her duty, whatever it is,' said Mr. Rock. But he did not let Miss Pentwistle see how glad he was. He did not even let her see that he was surprised. He only went on, as if the new state of affairs at the cottage was a quite natural one.

'But people cannot always gain a living now-a-days, even by doing their duty. How does Miss Dormer gain hers ?'

'Oh ! you know, she has a little money which Mrs. Antony had to give up when she married again ; and then there is her orphan's pension. I should think she can just about manage upon it, by

doing all her own work, gardening and everything. If you call that the duty of an educated girl, I don't agree with you.'

'Do you mean to say she has to labour in the house and garden?'

'Yes, who else is there to labour in either, with the old man paralysed as he is? I have just been down now, by Lady Lowater's request, to inquire after the poor man, and there I found her at the back of the house, digging over a plot of ground ready to put cabbages in for the winter. Of course I remonstrated with her.'

'Why didn't you dig, too? That would have been more to the purpose.'

'No, it would not, excuse me for contradicting you, Mr. Rock. I think people are bound to act according to their po-

sition in life. When it comes to an educated woman planting her own cabbages, I do call that carrying it too far.'

'It is carrying it just as far as it ought to go and no further, Miss Pentwistle. At the same time it is no use finding fault with Miss Dormer for planting cabbages, if one takes no steps to get them planted by somebody else. That seems to me to be the practical view of the matter. But I must go on home and get my affairs settled. Good-morning.'

Miss Pentwistle was quite glad that he should go on home. He had such an inconvenient way of turning everything into a practical direction. And she went on towards Cliff Cottage where she was making a call on the Murray-Mortimers.

She did not know that next morning, before daybreak, Stephen Rock, with a spade over his shoulder, was on his way

to Ben Dyson's plot of ground. And, by the time the labourers were out on the Lowater estate, he had planted all Miss Dormer's cabbages for her.

CHAPTER XII.

MISS PENTWISTLE had not enjoyed anything so much for a long time, the episode in the back-kitchen of Lowater Court perhaps excepted, as that round of calls, culminating with Mrs. Mortimer of the Cliff Cottage, which she had nearly completed when she met the curate. It was such a triumph to go through the whole story, to tell the Countess, and Lady Belleray, and the Dollingbrokes, with more detail than was possible at the garden-party, the successive steps by which the result had been worked out, beginning

with Mr. Antony's determination to have the ungratefully prosperous married daughter hunted out, and ending with the discovery that she was his own wife.

'To think of her making such fools of us all,' said Mrs. Mortimer; 'but they do say, when a woman is both clever and good-looking, she can do whatever she likes. You believed in her yourself, did you not, Miss Pentwistle?'

'Not after the very first. I must confess she did make a fool of me for a short time, but I soon found her out, Mrs. Mortimer, very soon. It was the inkstand, you know, which opened my eyes, and, when one has got one's eyes open, one looks. I began to have a firm conviction that something was wrong when that clairvoyance business turned up. If she had only been clever enough to have held

her tongue about that, she might have bamboozled us a little longer.'

'Yes. Or if she had told the same story to everyone. But to say it was clairvoyance first, and then to say she had been a visitor at the Court; well, you see, it naturally set people asking questions. I wonder she did not arrange all her plans, and determine what she was going to say before ever she came to live in the neighbourhood at all.'

'Ah! Mrs. Mortimer, if she had her present experience to go upon again, I have no doubt she would. But it takes a very clever person to be a good rogue. I don't know how it is, but people of that sort always seem to forgot something, leave out a screw or a bolt somewhere, and then the whole thing tumbles to pieces. Now, if Mrs. Antony had been a sensible woman, whatever else she did,

she would have seen to it that old Dyson was made comfortable. She should have allowed him, from the first, something out of her own pocket, so that he need never have come upon the parish at all, however much she might have to scrape and pinch for it. And she should not have let her husband know anything about it.'

'Oh! Miss Pentwistle, the married men will begin to be afraid of you, if you preach such a doctrine as that. I assure you, they like to know what their wives do with every sixpence, especially if there is no marriage settlement. Would you believe it, Mrs. Dollingbroke cannot spend half-a-crown without entering it in the book, and letting her husband see what it has gone for? I don't say Mr. Mortimer is as bad as that, but I don't think I could make away with five shillings a week and not be asked any questions about it.'

‘No ; but you could if you were as clever as some people. You could put it down under fish and poultry. A man never knows what that sort of thing costs. At least, he is a contemptible molly-coddle, if he goes and inquires. You may be sure Mrs. Antony could have managed a little bit of cheating like that easily enough, if the idea had only entered her head ; but, depend upon it, it never did. She just stopped short of being as clever as she ought to have been. And then, why didn’t she profess to be interested in the poor old man, and go and see him, and coddle him up from the first ? If she had only had the common-sense to make a sort of parish pet of him, her husband would never have stirred about to have things inquired into.’

‘I daresay not, particularly as he was afraid of her temper. I do believe, Miss

Pentwistle, a regular bad temper like Mrs. Antony's is a greater protection to a married woman than independent property, or a settlement, or anything else she can have. You see, it is always ready to be fallen back upon. And when there is an elegant manner, and a tolerably pretty face along with it, it is as good a protection as a coat of mail. I have it on the best authority that Mr. Antony is as thoroughly hen-pecked as a snobbish little man deserves to be. But, Miss Pentwistle, what a capital swindler you would have made !'

'I believe I should,' said that lady, cheerfully. 'At any rate, I should have looked at my swindle all round before I set it going. I would not have let it break down so miserably as Mrs. Antony's has done. I suppose you know about Miss Dormer ?'

‘Yes; gone to live with her grandfather, as she persists in calling that old man; and says she means to stay with him for the rest of his life. Was ever anything so utterly ridiculous? I hear Lady Lowater calls it splendid, and goes on visiting her all the same. Miss Pentwistle, *do* you think the finding out of everything had anything to do with Sir Merrion going away in such a hurry? You know, it was unmistakable how he used to follow her about at those garden-parties, and Lady Lowater never seemed to take the least trouble to stop it.’

‘My dear Mrs. Mortimer, it is my opinion that Lady Lowater had no wish to stop it. What she could be thinking about, I cannot tell, and that pretty little Lady Emily, who is to have all her aunt’s property, staying with the countess the whole time he was here. Why, with the

very least proper management, those two estates might have been made to go together, and then think what a splendid thing it would have been for the Lowaters. But Lady Lowater has the wildest notions of any woman I ever knew. She told me once she would not stir a finger about her son's marriage.'

'I think she stirred a good many when she asked Miss Dorner to come and stay at the Court. And anyone with the least penetration could see how it was going to be. As you said, Miss Pentwistle, coming fresh from a station where he never saw a lady from one year's end to another, he was sure to fall in love with the first pretty girl he met ; and it must have been a great disappointment to poor Miss Dorner that things could not have been kept quiet just long enough for her to become Lady Lowater. When they were once

married, the scullery-maid business could not have made any difference.'

'Not to her rights, of course, but a good deal to her happiness. I don't fancy she is a person who could look out for herself like Mrs. Antony, and get what belonged to her, simply because it was her own. It is my private opinion that she did not care for him, though it is quite possible she would have married him for the sake of the position.'

'Of course, Miss Pentwistle; who would not? But what in the world makes you think she did not care?'

'She seems so perfectly contented where she is now. Of course, I don't like to go to the cottage much, because I have a sort of feeling that she may look upon me as in some way connected with the change in her circumstances. But, when I have to take a message or anything of that sort,

she appears to me to be remarkably cheerful ; and Lady Lowater says she believes she is happier than she has been for a long time.'

'Then Lady Lowater does keep on with her. I thought it might be only a report.'

'Keep on with her, my dear Mrs. Mortimer ? Lady Lowater goes to the cottage every day, and I believe the gardeners and kitchen people have orders to send all sorts of things. I should think that old man has never fared so well in his life as he does now. Miss Dormer has made an arrangement with Mrs. Shorrocks to go in and do the rough work every morning, and, you know, she is as strong as a horse herself, so that the cooking and tidying is no trouble to her. I daresay she is a great deal happier now than she was with her fine lady mother.'

'But surely not so happy as she must

have been at Lowater Court, with all the refinements of luxury about her. Dear me, Miss Pentwistle, to think of the vicissitudes of life !'

'It is better to think of them than to have to go through them,' said Miss Pentwistle, rather sharply, thinking not of Valence Dormer's lot, but of how little Mrs. Mortimer, with a double name and a good income, had had to encounter in the shape of what could be called vicissitudes. No need for her to go finding out uncomfortable things about other people, in order to keep a good roof over her own head.

For after all, as Miss Pentwistle said to herself, people must live. And though it seemed as if she herself had been at the bottom of all this upheaval, still she had only acted as an instrument in the hands of other people. If she had not found things

out, some one else would. Her own private feelings against Mrs. Antony had not, so she had quite convinced herself, actuated her in the course she had taken. The inquiries were entered upon simply as a matter of duty. She was not responsible for their issue. Things must have been found out sooner or later, and they might just as well be found out in time for herself to have the benefit of the discovery. Whatever Miss Dorner might think about it, no doubt Sir Merrion was very much obliged to her for what she had done. If he really had had any serious intentions, her timely action had saved him from unutterable mortification and disgust. And Lady Lowater, too. With all her romantic ideas, she could scarcely have flown in the face of public opinion to the extent of marrying her only son to a girl of Miss Dorner's antecedents. She was disap-

pointed, doubtless, just at present ; but her own common sense would convince her, by-and-by, that things could not have come to a crisis more opportunely. Putting her own private interests out of the question, Miss Pentwistle felt that all had happened for the best.

And, after a little more discussion on the subject, she went on with her cards to the next house.

CHAPTER XIII.

ANYONE going past Ben Dyson's cottage a few weeks after Sir Merrion's departure, would have noticed a certain difference in its appearance. Valence Dormer's individuality could not help impressing itself upon her surroundings. She did not adapt herself to circumstances, she adapted circumstances to herself. She could not live anywhere without making both her character and her activity felt.

It was this realising power in her nature, this necessity for being herself and no one else, which made life not a satis-

factory thing for her when it had to be lived with a woman like Mrs. Antony. And it was the feeling of independence now, of being able to be true to herself and able to shape her conduct according to her own convictions, which gave to her, in the woodman's cottage, a sunny cheerfulness which neither the Elms nor Lowater Court had ever brought.

‘Valence child, I cannot understand you,’ said Lady Lowater, one sunny August afternoon as she sat in the little porch amongst the blossoming honeysuckle and jessamine. ‘Nothing that fortune or misfortune can do for you seems to make any difference.’

‘Why should it, whilst the people I care for are true to me?’ said Valence.

And she said it with a clear, straightforward look into my lady's face, a look which was perhaps meant to say that Sir

Merrion's going away had not stirred so much as a ripple on the surface of her life.

‘Do you miss nothing here, Valence?’

‘Yes, I miss a great deal. I miss the constant presence of unreality and false appearances. I miss the worldliness which takes things for what they seem, instead of for what they are. I think I miss most of all the hollowness which dare not tell all the world who and what it is.’

Lady Lowater turned her face quickly away into the shadow. Valence Dorner might have known everything, so keenly did her words cut down to the root of the life that had to be lived at the Court. But the girl was only speaking of her own home, and she went on, simply enough,

‘I have never in my life wanted much, except work to do and to be allowed to do it in my own way. You see I have both

now, and so I ought to be content. There is, at any rate, nobody but myself to blame if I cannot shape things as I want them.'

'If you mean the material things, you have shaped them very successfully already.'

And Lady Lowater looked through into the little cottage interior which was as fair a picture of comfort as one need wish to see. Ben's great chair was set in the window, so that he could get the sunshine and the fresh air too. The quaint old furniture, dark with many a year of bees' wax and polishing, showed a reflection of flowers everywhere. Valence had them on the delf-case, and on the chests of drawers, and on the little table by Ben's chair. And the bit of red curtain, which she had made and put up a few weeks ago, cast a warm glow of colour over all the room.

'It looks just like a picture,' said Lady

Lowater. ‘I believe even the magpie knows that things are properly attended to, for he has not half such an air of fault-finding as he used to have in poor Margaret’s time, before you came to help her. But it isn’t having things pleasant and pretty that does everything. You want companionship as well. Don’t you often feel lonely here?’

Valenee laughed.

‘Lonely, because Miss Pentwistle and Mrs. Murray-Mortimer and Mrs. Petipase don’t come to see me? Well, if I am, I have not found it out yet. And to all the kindnesses that you have done for me, Lady Lowater, I hope you will add this, *not* to ask them at any rate to take pity upon my loneliness, if I do begin to feel it. No, I don’t want anything else than for things to keep going on just as they are. I am happier now than I have been since I

came home from that hospital in Belgium.'

'And the scouring, child,' said Lady Lowater, glancing at the spotless cleanliness of the stone floor and the ironwork about the fireplace. 'You can never do that by yourself.'

'No, not exactly, but I can pay Mrs. Shorrocks to do it for me, and, what is more to the purpose, I can tell her how to do it. She comes in every morning, to make things right for me, and she comes again at night to see if I have any errands for her. All the rest I can do myself, and I am as happy as a queen in doing it. You know, as nobody comes to see me but yourself, and sometimes Mr. Rock, I have no bells to attend to. That is such a comfort. Pity me if you like, but don't think that I need it. I don't think you have any idea how much time I have really at my own disposal, now that what one calls society

lets me alone. Grandfather and I have long talks together. I have got accustomed to his voice now, so that I can understand every word he says, and he is far better company for me than most of the society people I have come across. I really do not think I am much worse off than when I was on speaking terms with all the ladies of Lowater. Then, you see, not having to entertain callers, I am at liberty to spend as much time as I like in the garden. You cannot think what a relief it is to me to get into my apron and gloves and dig away at my flower-beds without any fear that in the midst of it I shall be visited by the rank and fashion of the neighbourhood.

‘ You are a curious girl, Valence. I wish we could all be as independent. You must have been busy, though. Why, those cabbages, I know the time it takes

to put them in. I have sat in the kitchen garden sometimes, on the slope of the hill, and watched the men at work until my own back has ached for sympathy. And you have done it all yourself.'

And Lady Lowater looked across the trim little patch of garden in front of the cottage to a plot of ground beyond, whose orderly arrangement and productiveness used to be Ben's pride in the old times. Valence laughed. .

'Well, no. You must not quite give me the credit of all that, and I am sure I do not know who ought to have it, unless the fairies come and work while we sleep. In spring grandfather had planted potatoes there, and a week or two ago they were ready to take up, and then he told me I must put in cabbages to be ready for the winter ; there was a little bed of them waiting in the corner. So I set to work and

got a couple of rows of the potatoes dug up and laid out in that tool-house at the end of the cottage, and next day I put in the rows of cabbages instead of them, just as grandfather told me I ought to do, because, you see, I have had no experience in gardening yet. I feel a great deal more at home amongst rows of beds than rows of cabbages. And next morning, when I went to dig up two more lines and make room for the plants, I found the potatoes were already taken up, and the plants put in their place, and so on until all the plot was done. And after that I found the potatoes sorted over in the tool-house, all the big ones in one heap, and the little ones in another, and how it came about I cannot tell, unless the fairies did it'

'I might have thought of having it done myself,' said Lady Lowater, thoughtfully, 'but I never did. I am sure there are

gardeners enough at the Court and to spare. I will see that one of them is sent over for a couple of hours or more every day.'

'Oh! no, no,' said Valence, 'don't do that. Whoever does this work for grandfather, I know that it is done for love. I ask no questions, but I am sure that some of the poor people in the village help him. They remember how proud he used to be of his little bit of garden. I don't ever want to find out who it is. I like to think that even a poor man has friends who are glad to give him their time and trouble without so much as being thanked for it.'

'It is very like what—'

And then Lady Lowater stopped. She was going to say it was very like what Mr. Rock would have done. But then came the question into her mind, was he

doing it for Valence? If so, she would be silent.

At the same time, she wondered she had not thought of him from the first. Stephen Rock. Yes, he was one who could see, better than most others, the true nobility of the life lived now in that cottage. And little heed would he take of what Society might call disgrace or degradation in the toil which no fault of her own had forced upon this brave-spirited girl. It was he who was helping her, none else, and he was trying to do it so that no one should find him out.

Lady Lowater was more sure of it next morning, when, pacing up and down her own room, as she often did now, wakeful and weary, she chanced to draw the curtain, and there in the grey dawn she saw Mr. Rock, with his spade on his shoulder,

going rapidly across the browning corn-fields, until he reached the tall hedge on this side the woodman's cottage. There he disappeared.

'It will come to that,' she said to herself. 'I might have known a love like Merrion's could never content her.'

CHAPTER XIV.

VALENCE had been about three weeks at her grandfather's cottage, long enough for her to have tired of the life appointed to her there, had it not been a life after her own heart. But anyone looking into her face now, watching the vigour of her step, the energy which she put into all her work, might have seen well enough that the days had lost none of their brightness for her, that the 'vicissitudes' through which she was passing had only shaken off from her those accidents of position and surrounding whose influence had

never really touched herself, except to chafe and annoy.

As for old Ben Dyson, he could scarcely believe the good fortune which had wrought such a change in his daily life. It was some time before he could drop the 'Miss Valence' to which he had become accustomed in the earlier days of their intercourse, and longer still before he could realise that blood of his own flowed in the veins of this bright young girl, who seemed like God's good angel in his home and by his bedside.

'Folk may call thee what they like,' he would say, as, in her blue hospital dress, she went about her daily work in the cottage, 'but I'm like to call thee Miss Valence still, and the bonniest lady in the parish at that. And, if I'd only been what I used to be before I got my stroke, it isn't as much as a hand's-turn I would have

let you do that I'd had the strength to do for you. I was never the man to sit still and let a lady fend for me.'

'I know that, grandfather,' Valence replied, with a kiss on the big, brown, furrowed forehead: 'but let us be thankful there isn't more than I can do for us both. And, now that the fairies have come to work on the potato-ground, there's no telling what may happen next.'

'Ay, little one, that beats me, it does. I've laid here many an hour, studying, since you told me. It might be Jeff Lazenby, maybe, him as I helped off last year when he'd been agate with the poaching. Mr. Antony was always that sharp about the game that it would ha' gone hard if the police had got upon him, and maybe he knows I stood his friend.'

'No, grandfather, it couldn't be Jeff. Don't you remember, when Mr. Rock was

here the other day, he said both Jeff and his brother Ralph had got work over at the countess's place, and had their three miles to walk every morning before light? They could have no time to help you.'

' Well, then, honey, it might be Rattenby, him as sings bass in the church choir. He'd used to be sweet upon my poor Margaret when she lived housemaid at the Court, and there's no telling what a man won't do for anyone as belongs to her he loved. If it isn't Rattenby, I can't say no more; but it's a good friend and a true, whoever it may be, and I hope he'll get his wage in God's blessing, as he isn't getting it no other way. I didn't think there was any that would have done it for me like that, and me not one that ever went about amongst them, to speak of. But you can never tell till the time comes.'

‘And not always then,’ said Valence, with a laugh, ‘or we should not be sitting here puzzling ourselves about it now. We will settle that it *is* the fairies, and very good gardeners they have proved themselves. They know what to do with potatoes, too. I found ours all nicely sorted the other morning, and laid in separate heaps in the tool-house.’

‘I’d like to know, Miss Valence, honey. It’s somebody does it before the day is up, and quietly too; or you, being a light sleeper, would hear. If you was to get up now, some time early of a morning, and step round to the back.’

‘Nay, grandfather, I’ll never do that. Depend upon it, it is some one who does not want himself known, and we will let him do it his own way. When I told Lady Lowater, she said she would send one of the Court gardeners for a couple of

hours every day, but I said I had far rather let things be as they are. It is so much pleasanter to receive a kindness from one who does it of his own free will. I will never try to find out who it is. Yonder is the newspaper-boy going up to the Court. Now, grandfather, that is one of the things I *do* miss. It was so pleasant to get a good long look at the *Times* every day, and I never know what is happening now.'

'My lady would let you see it, and welcome, Valence, if she only gave it a thought. It makes all the difference does giving a thought. I'll make bold myself to ask her next time she comes.'

'No, never, grandfather, In that case Miss Pentwistle would very likely take to bringing it, as she goes on her rounds through the village, and I don't want Miss Pentwistle about here. To know

that some one is taking notice of everything, for the purpose of repeating it somewhere else, would be very disagreeable.'

'Ay, honey, she's one that sees a deal, and tells more than she sees. All the same, if it hadn't been for her, things might have been going on as bravely as ever at Mr. Antony's. It's her we've got to thank.'

'No, grandfather, they wouldn't. People had begun to question and wonder, and fit things together. All would have been found out before long. But don't let us talk about that. I am here, and I am glad to be here, and here I mean to stay until—'

Just then Mr. Rock appeared in sight, toiling up the steep bit of brae that was the nearest road from Byborough to the Court. It was so steep that only those in

desperate need of a short-cut ever took it.

‘ Grandfather, that is surely Mr. Rock. Whatever can he be coming up in such a hurry for? I wonder if there is anything wrong at the Court.’

And flinging on her hat Valence went to the top of the brae, up which the curate was struggling with all the strength left in him. The perspiration was streaming down his face, his clothes were soiled and splashed, and his right hand was tucked into the breast of his coat instead of being used to help him up the steep stony hill-side. With the other he was waving and gesticulating to anyone who might be within sight of him.

‘ Stop that boy! ’ he cried, as Valence appeared on the top of the brae.

‘ What boy? ’

With a desperate effort he flung his wide-awake in the direction the newspaper-lad had just taken.

'Stop him! quick, quick!'

Without waiting to hear why, Valence rushed after him and seized him by the collar, just as he was turning into the stable entrance. She thought it could be nothing less than stealing, to call for such strong measures. But with the true British instinct of believing a man, and a boy too, innocent so long as he is not proved guilty, she forebore reproaches until he was brought face to face with his accuser. Still she was sure Mr. Rock would never have pursued him in such an energetic manner unless something serious had happened, and so she kept fast hold of his collar, possession being nine points of the law.

When she got back to the cottage, Mr. Rock was there too. He had thrown himself down on the little bit of grass-plot in front of the porch, panting and breathless.

‘Here he is, Mr. Rock. What has he been doing?’

‘Nothing at all,’ said the curate. ‘I only wanted him back again.’

‘I beg your pardon, Jem;’ and Valence loosened her hold of the boy’s collar. ‘I really thought it must be a case of stop thief, Mr. Rock seemed in such a hurry. Perhaps he wants you to run for a doctor for some one. I had never thought of that. How stupid of me.’

Jem, secure in the possession of a good conscience, seemed to look upon the whole affair as a joke, and stood there in the cottage garden with a comfortable bucolic grin upon his face, until such time as Mr. Rock, who had not recovered his breath yet, should be able to give a reason for obstructing a person who might be called a public functionary in the discharge of his duties.

‘ Give me all the papers, Jem,’ said the curate, as soon as he could speak, ‘ all the papers, I mean, that you were going to leave at the Court.’

Jem sorted them out from his bundle, a *Times*, a *Standard*, and one or two others.

‘ Miss Dormer, you know if they are all right.’

‘ I haven’t got no more than these here,’ said the boy. ‘ And if you don’t want me, I’ve plenty to do.’

‘ Do it, then. If you have given me all the papers for the Court, I want nothing more from you. Only be sure you don’t go and leave anyone else’s there in mistake. You have nothing to go to the Court now, have you?’

‘ No, sir.’ And the boy touched his cap and went off in an opposite direction.

‘ Now, Mr. Rock, please, what is it all

about? I don't like collar ing honest boys and then having to make apologies to them. Jem must have thought I was after him for a thief. And what have you done to your hand, that you keep it inside your coat ?'

' I stumbled as I was climbing up that brae and gave it a twist. I can't do anything with it now.'

' Then you must let me bind it up for you.'

And Valence was on her way into the cottage to look for some strips, but Mr. Rock stopped her.

' Not yet, you must hear this first. Just open out that paper, I can't.'

Valence opened it. Mr. Rock pointed to one column.

' There, read that. Read it to yourself.'

He watched her closely, intently, as she

read. His face was in the shadow, hers in the sunlight, so that he could note every change which passed over it.

After awhile she laid the paper down. There were tears in her eyes.

‘Poor Lady Lowater! Oh, poor Lady Lowater!’

The pain in her voice was the pain of intense pity, only that. And for another, not for herself.

Stephen Rock laid his head back against the trellis-work of the porch, and shut his eyes. His face was pale, but with excitement now, more than suffering. For awhile there was silence. Then again he watched her intently.

‘You must go and tell Lady Lowater,’ he said.

Valence turned upon him.

‘Oh! I understand. You wanted to keep the papers from her so that she might

not hear of it in that way. Mr. Rock, that was very good.'

'Never mind what it was. Tell me if you can bear to let her hear of it from you. Will it hurt you too much? If so, I will go. But you would do it better.'

'I will do it as well as I can,' said Valence, gently and solemnly.

'Go, then. And, if you will let me, I will wait here until you come back.'

'I will not go until I have bound up your wrist for you. The boy goes to the Court before he goes to any other place, so that no one has the news yet. There is a good half-hour. I am not going to leave you like this.'

To look clearly at one thing at a time; to consider what was best to be done about that one thing, and to do it forthwith; that was so like Valence Dormer. She fetched the bandages, did what wanted

doing in a steady, workman-like manner, with no fuss or nonsense ; then told him to go and rest on the bench in the porch.

‘Your hand won’t be much use to you for a fortnight,’ she said. ‘I don’t know what you will do for your Sunday sermon. You will not be able to write a new one.’

‘I don’t suppose you will consider that much loss, Miss Dormer.’

‘How do you know?’

‘Miss Pentwistle told me as much.’

‘Miss Pentwistle tells more than she knows, then. All the same, what you are doing for Lady Lowater now, is better than fifty sermons.’

‘It is you who are going to do that, Miss Dormer. I believe you are the right person to do it. She will bear it better from you than from anyone else.’

‘I don’t think,’ said Valence, with a

strange, new touch of humility in her voice, 'that I can do it so well as you; but if you think it is my duty, I will do it as well as I can. I must go and tell grandfather first.'

She went into the kitchen, where the old man lay by the open window in the sunshine. Stephen Rock leaned forward to listen to her voice, but there was still nothing but solemn pity in it as she said,

' Grandfather, there has been bad news. The *Arethusa* has been burned, and nearly all on board, but the women and children, have perished. Sir Merrion Lowater is dead too. That was why Mr. Rock wanted Jem stopped, that Lady Lowater should not hear it in that way. I am going now to tell her. He thinks I ought to go.'

In a few minutes she came back, with her straw hat on.

‘Mr. Rock, keep your wrist up well. You are letting it hang down. It will hurt you ever so much more, so. Is it bad now? You look pale.’

‘No; I am only disappointed I cannot finish something I wanted to do.’

‘If you will dictate to me, I will write your sermon for you, Mr. Rock. It is the least I can do, after what Miss Pentwistle has told you.’

‘It isn’t a sermon, thank you. But come along, I am not going to rest here. I am going to sit in the plantation, by the lily-pond, and wait until you come back from the Court. I want to be quiet and think.’

They went out together, neither speaking a word, until they came to the mossy stones by the edge of the pond, where Sir Merrion used to sit and fish. There were some remains of his tackle and bait

left there now, and one or two little minnows which he had flung aside lying dry and shrivelled in the sun. Not the only things he had flung aside ; but Stephen Rock did not know that.

‘I shall wait for you here,’ he said.

And then he watched her, as slowly, thoughtfully, she took her way to the Court.

‘It is not as I thought,’ he murmured to himself, with a great sigh of relief. ‘She is only bearing it for another. And may God help that other.’

CHAPTER XV.

‘You need not wait for me; I may be long,’ Valence had said to her grandfather, as she went out of the cottage-garden. And she was long.

Coming out from Lady Lowater’s room, a couple of hours later, her eyes were dim with tears. There rested on her face the reflected shadow of another’s grief. Stephen Rock waited for her by the lily-pond.

‘She wants you too,’ Valence said. And he went. All through that summer day the sunshine smote bravely down upon

Lowater Court, turning to emerald and gold the mosses that nestled amongst its grey old stones. But closed blinds and shutters gave it no way within, and in a darkened room, looking westward to the cottage, a woman sat with bowed head and hot, tearless eyes, smoothing a lock of fair crisp hair, which was all that was left to her of her boy now.

‘Read it to me again,’ she said to Stephen Rock, as he knelt beside her, speaking no word, only holding fast her poor trembling hands, which must have something to clasp in their pain.

And he read to her how the brave vessel was nearing its port, and how within sight of land the flames sprang up, and the wind tossed them into strength, and how the boats had been lowered and the women and children saved, and how the captain then would have had the officers escape

for their lives, and a few had done it; but the most, and Merrion amongst them, had stood fast by their men, choosing rather to die than leave them. And there those in the boats had seen him, brave, fearless at his post to the last, until a great mass of blazing canvas fell upon him, and in that fiery mantle his soul went its way.

‘He did well,’ she said, drawing one hand away from Stephen Rock’s to put her grey hairs back ; and she lifted herself proudly up. And then she whispered to herself,

‘Perhaps he could die more bravely than he could live. But still he did well.’

‘He did well,’ said Stephen Rock, only hearing those last words. ‘His name was Merrion Lowater. How should he do other than well ?’

With a bitter cry, Lady Lowater rose;

and the tears came raining down upon the lock of golden hair in her lap.

‘Now it will be better,’ said Stephen Rock. And so, quietly, he left her, not knowing at all how the words he meant for peace had only entered as iron into her soul.

Far on into the evening she walked up and down there in her chamber in a darkness to which neither sunshine nor hope could come. And she said,

‘My boy has been slain for my sin. Life has done its worst for me. There is nothing left for me to be afraid of now.’

At nightfall Valence came again. My lady was sitting alone, very cold and very pale.

‘Valence,’ she said, ‘keep them all away, and go with me where I can look out upon the sea.’

So they two went down amongst the

dewy grass, the young girl holding up the tottering woman's steps, and past the lily-pond and the hyacinth beds, where the cruel traps had been set, and along the steep path to the rock-seat. And there in the moonlight they heard the waves breaking and plashing far below. And on the grey sea a single ship was slowly moving westward, its sails motionless like ghostly wings upon the horizon.

Lady Lowater watched it until it vanished behind the headland of the Cove. Then she said again,

‘Life has done its worst for me.’

But this time she did not stay at that. When she had said it, she stood upright, her haggard face lifted to the moonlight, and she said, in a clear, distinct voice, as though taking upon herself some solemn promise,

‘Now I will do my best.’

Valence stood apart. She did not understand. There was silence awhile—silence but for the plashing of the waves and the rustling of the dewy leaves. Then Lady Lowater turned and looked from her queenly height into the young girl's face, and took hold of her hands and said,

‘Valence, some day you will know that I have done my best. And I want you to promise here that, when you know it, you will love me still.’

‘Lady Lowater, I must always love you. I cannot help it.’

‘Ah! child, try, try. There are dark days before me.’

And then they went back again to the house.

CHAPTER XVI.

MISS PENTWISTLE's feelings, on hearing what had taken place, were of a mingled character. Naturally, she looked at the catastrophe from her own point of view —that is, as it might affect her own position.

Looked at in that way, it had much better not have happened. Of course Lady Lowater now would have to give up her residence at the Court, give it up at least within a twelvemonth, and retire to the little dower-house on the outside of the park. And that dower-house,

though comfortable enough for two women both past their prime, meant altogether a different kind of life from the one they had been accustomed to live in the family mansion, as the representatives, in their sole persons, of the family grandeur.

Miss Pentwistle began to wish she had let things alone. She felt that even the sweetness of such revenge as is proper to a Christian woman may be bought at too high a price. She had intended to humiliate Mrs. Antony, and to put a stop to any ambitious plans which Miss Dormer might be cherishing relative to the young baronet. And, by stopping these, she had hoped to fortify her own position at the Court, to make herself permanently indispensable to Lady Lowater.

But this little arrangement had contained within itself the materials for an

explosion of an altogether unlooked-for character. She had not by any means intended to sacrifice herself in setting fire to the powder-bags of her enemy. The citadel was to be blown up, and then she was to take possession. That was how she had arranged it. But now not only the citadel, but her own position outside, had been demolished. At least, one might look upon a residence in that stupid little dower-house as practically demolition, after the freedom and almost magnificence to which she had been accustomed. The whole thing was very mortifying.

However, one must take things as Providence ordered them. That was what Miss Pentwistle said when she went down to see Mrs. Petipase, after reading the sad account in the papers. For she had a fine talent for carving out her own plans,

and then placing them in the hands of Providence to have the label of divine guidance put upon them, just as dishonest manufacturers make up faulty goods and then send them to a good port to be shipped, after which they are received by credulous buyers as the genuine products of the nation from which they come. Of course no one could say that the catastrophe which had rendered Lady Lowater childless was not providential. It bore upon its very head and front the credentials of a message from above. Miss Pentwistle's action had been 'overruled.' And, so far as she was suffering, though in a smaller degree, from the calamity which had fallen upon Lady Lowater, she was to be pitied.

That it would be a case of leaving the Court there was no doubt. The family who stood next in succession were by no

means rich. They were living now on a comparatively small estate in a distant part of the country, and such a change as the young baronet's death had produced would be very advantageous in a pecuniary point of view.

Besides, Lady Lowater had never kept up any intimacy with them. Instead, there had been a sort of shyness and reserve, which of late had deepened into almost estrangement, so that they would not be likely now to pay her ladyship the courtesy of offering the use of the Court during the remainder of her life. No, there was nothing for it but the comparative meanness of the dower-house; and to that accordingly Miss Pentwistle made up her mind, feeling that in doing so she was displaying an admirable example of Christian resignation.

For several days after that terrible

morning, Lady Lowater saw no one but Valence Dorner and Mr. Rock. Miss Pentwistle was bidden to carry on her usual occupations, as regarded balancing of accounts and giving of orders; but it was Valence who sat in my lady's darkened room, and read the letters of condolence, and replied to them; and stood, so far as she could, between the desolate woman and all the dreary conventionalities which death brings into any house. And then the official details came down from London, and Valence went through them all. Lady Lowater's face became almost grand in its pride as she listened. How bravely this boy of hers, who had shown himself feeble and changeful in the first trial of his young life, had stood firm as a rock when the duty he had pledged to his country was demanded from him. At the last he had dared and done well.

Death had covered him with a glory which perhaps from life he could never have won.

‘I am proud of him,’ his mother said.
‘And now it is all over.’

Yet it was strange, they thought, that she never mourned for the going out of the old Lowater name. And when Stephen Rock, who had his own pride of race, said again that, bearing the name he did, the young man could not but have done nobly, Lady Lowater turned her face from him, and answered never a word.

Day and night, for a week, Valence Dormer stayed there, doing what she could; and then she went back to the little cottage by the plantation. The old man was lying on his bed by the window. His voice was just a little feebler, the light in his eyes more dim. It seemed as if he, too, was wearing on to the

end. But his voice was cheery as ever.

‘Thou’s welcome back, Valence honey, as welcome as the bees when spring gets turned. Mrs. Shorrocks has been as good as gold, but she isn’t like one’s own, when all’s said and done. And I’m thinking we shall have the fairies to help us a bit with the potato-patch, now you’re here again.’

‘Why, haven’t they been, grandfather, all this week past?’

‘Never to do so much as a stroke, honey. Leastways, Mrs. Shorrocks says so. Everything is just as it was that morning you went away. It stands to reason it can’t be Bill Rattenby now, or he wouldn’t have stopped. And Jeff, you say, is off three miles away, so it can’t be him.’

‘Well, never mind, grandfather,’ said Valence, rather wearily; for those days and nights in the presence of such a grief as Lady Lowater’s had pressed some of the

life out of her. And here, too, in the cottage, she must be continually giving, and no one gave to her. ‘Never mind, grandfather, I will set to work myself, now that I am back again. A bit of digging will do me good after I have been sitting still so long. See if I don’t make a beginning upon them to-morrow morning.’

‘Well, if you don’t, honey, somebody else must, or they’ll be getting past it. They’re a thing, is potatoes, that, if you don’t look to them in time, you may as well leave them. They’ve been fit this ten days, and, if it comes wet, they’ll spoil in the ground. Rattenby would come to them in a minute, if he only knew. It’s a pity when good food can’t be took care of.’

‘Don’t you trouble, grandfather,’ said Valence, kissing away the anxious look from his face, as he lay there. ‘We’ll have

them up and safe in good time. There are worse things to trouble about now, for poor Lady Lowater.'

'Ay, honey! I might have thought of that before I spoke. And how is her ladyship?'

'She bears it as a woman should, whose only child has died bravely for his country, grandfather, for his country and his duty.'

Just a glimmer of the old fire kindled in Ben Dyson's eyes.

'Ay, that's it. There's them belonging to ourselves, Valence, has done just the same, though when it's a man in the ranks it don't get talked about. But I'm glad Sir Merrion went as he did, if he had to go. There's a deal in some of these young gentry, as you might think cared for nothing but their game and their sporting and that. When the worst comes to the

worst, then you find out what they're made of. And stood to it to the very last, they say, to save the women and children.'

'Yes,' said Valence. 'His mother may well be proud of him now, if she never was before.'

'She was always proud of him, Valence, honey, as far as I could see, being all she had, and a deal depending on him. And the Lowaters are always a sort that can do when there's a need for it. Not but what Sir Guy was bad enough, if all folks says is true, but ill-blood gets into the best families, and Sir Merrion would have bettered it, I don't doubt, if he'd been let live. You'd used to see a deal of him, didn't you, when you was a lady up at the Court, going walking about with him and that? Eh, but I wonder he didn't stop when his mother set such store by him.'

'It was better for him to die as he did,'

said Valence. 'Now she will never remember anything of him that is not noble. But if I am to set to work in the morning, grandfather, I must rest.'

And Valence went to her little bed in the chamber over the porch, and there, if she could not sleep, the night brought its own rest and quietness.

True to her promise, she was up and at work next morning. Five o'clock found her in her print dress, gardening apron, and broad-brimmed straw hat, on her way to the potato patch; but not this time singing as she went, for thoughts of the wretchedness so near her lay heavy on her heart. And something, too, in her grandfather's look, as she came home to him the night before, had made her feel that things could not be always as they were now; that death would have its own, sooner or later. And its own given, what loneliness then for her!

However, there was the work to be done. The best kindness to her old grandfather was not to think sad thoughts for him, but to dig up and sort the potatoes, and so give him one cause less to think sad thoughts for himself. Looking at it in that way, Valence set forward as cheerily as she could, and found that the fairies were indeed at work again, though in a most material guise, the guise of a man in good, serviceable working garb, who was doing her work for her with such hearty goodwill that he never even heard her step until she was close upon him.

It might be Rattenby, or it might be Jeff working his gratitude for old Ben Dyson's help in the poaching business, so far as Valence could make out. Whoever it might be, he was awkward enough, and lefthanded and slow, but he was a true gentleman at heart to be doing it at all,

and she felt she must express her gratitude accordingly.

‘Thank you very much,’ she said, as soon as she was within speaking distance. ‘We have been wondering who helped us so kindly. Grandfather thought it must be either Jeff or Rattenby. Is it you, Rattenby?’

And then Stephen Rock turned upon her a face to which early morning exercise had not given all its glow.

His first impulse was to fling down his spade and escape by jumping over the hedge. But that would be no use, for Miss Dorner had already found him out.

‘Confound it!’ he said to himself, with more vehemence than propriety. ‘Why couldn’t she get up in reasonable time, like other people?’ And then, raising his cap, he wished the young lady good-morning, and began to make his apologies.

‘I heard somebody say you were doing this yourself, and I thought it was a shame somebody stronger shouldn’t do it for you. I meant to have got it done whilst you were over yonder at the Court, but you know why I couldn’t.’

And then Valence saw that his hand was still fastened up in a sling. That accounted for the awkward fashion in which he had been doing his work.

‘Mr. Rock !’ she said, as he turned round upon her. And then she remembered all his annoyance and disappointment at the time of the hurt, because he said it prevented him from finishing some work he had in hand. It was Mr. Rock then, who had been the good fairy amongst the cabbages and potatoes ; Mr. Rock who, after his hard day’s work, had got up morning by morning, long before the sun, to do a service that nobody should thank him for ; who

was doing it now at the cost of pain and inconvenience ; Mr. Rock whom she had looked upon, together with most of his profession, as a man only of theories, not much use at all in the practical business of life ; and whom, even as a clergyman, she was only just beginning to respect, because of his kindness to Lady Lowater. She had scarcely given him credit for being able to preach, and now he was showing her that he could practise too.

This was more than she could bear. The thought of her injustice to him, and his tender, thoughtful kindness to her, joined perhaps with the strain which she had been putting upon herself for so long, broke her down. And hiding her face in her hands she began to cry passionately.

‘ It is too much,’ she said. ‘ I cannot bear it.’

Stephen Rock thought she meant the humiliation to which she was put, by a stranger doing for her by stealth and for pity what she could no longer procure as service. That kindness of his should move her to tears, did not enter his mind.

‘I was a simpleton,’ he said, ‘to have kept on at it so long. I ought to have cleared out an hour ago; but, only having one hand, I got on so slowly, and I did want to have this row cleared. Here, come and sit down until you can get straight again.’

And he took off his coat and folded it upon the heap of potatoes which he had turned up, and took Valence by the shoulders and made her sit down upon it.

‘Stay here until I fetch you some water.’

Which he was purposely a long time bringing, that she might have time to ‘get straight.’

‘I can only tell you I’m very sorry you’ve found out,’ he said, when he came back from the cottage. ‘I thought I could have done it by a bit at a time in this way, without you or your grandfather being any the wiser. And I mean to finish it now, so you can go back as soon as you like. I am not going to let you put a finger to it again.’

Valence choked back her tears.

‘I think I am a simpleton too,’ she began.

‘Yes, you are, Miss Dorner, to come out at this time of the morning, to do what any decent man would be only too glad to do for you. And I shan’t have half so much pleasure in doing it, now that you know who it is. But you will leave it, won’t you, and let me have the satisfaction of making an end of it as soon as I can?’

‘Indeed I will,’ said Valence. ‘But to

think of your taking all this trouble for grandfather and me.'

'Sweet is service when the master is beloved.'

That was all Stephen Rock could say, and when he had said it he coloured up to the roots of his hair, feeling as if he had betrayed himself. But he need not have been afraid. Valence only replied, quite simply and straightforwardly,

'Yes, I do believe my grandfather is very much respected. Everyone is glad to help him. All the same, I feel as if I should like to do some of that digging too.'

'Then I don't,' said Mr. Rock, telling the inmost barefaced story of which he had ever been guilty, but telling it with the saving clause that he had ten times rather it had been the truth. For what so pleasant to him as to be digging there with Valence by his side measuring her strokes with his? Indeed,

he was beginning to feel a strange delight in her presence, for was he not showing her that he had the capacity for better work than she had given him credit for?

‘Well now, are you going?’ he said, facing round upon her with almost a look of authority. ‘I think you might just as well be taking your rest in the house.’

‘Yes,’ replied Valence, gathering up her things which had rather gone astray during that burst of tears. ‘But I want to say one thing before I go. I have often been very rude to you, and I am very sorry for it.’

‘Well, yes, you have,’ said the curate. ‘But I don’t know that I am sorry for it, now that *you* have found it out. You will perhaps give me credit for even a little more than I deserve, to make up for the past.’

‘I don’t think I shall ever give you credit

for more than you deserve now, Mr. Rock. I don't think anybody else would have been so good to me, and when I had been so unjust to you too. I thought, you know, that it all stopped at preaching, and it was a great shame of me.'

'All right,' said the curate. 'I have no doubt plenty more people have thought the same. Now, if Providence had made me four inches higher, and given me a fine bass voice that could go down to D below the line, I might have impressed you differently. You are only like the rest of them. You judge according to appearances, and you are quite right in considering *them* rather contemptible.'

There was a touch of bitterness in his manner, which made Valence for the first time wish to say something gentle to him. Hitherto she had rather liked to flout him when she had the opportunity.

‘I *did* judge according to appearances,’ she said, humbly, ‘and so I did not judge righteous judgment.’

‘Righteous judgment, indeed! How should you? I’m glad you read enough of your Bible to know what keeps people from forming righteous judgments. You and Miss Pentwistle want shaking up together. You don’t give a man a chance so long as he shows a bit of his cloth, and she doesn’t give him a chance if she thinks he is showing anything else. Now, the right way lies between the two. I should say to Miss Pentwistle that a parson ought to be good for as much in his shirt-sleeves as in his cassock, and I should say to you that his preaching a good sermon ought not to make you believe in him less as a creditable digger of potatoes.’

‘And a sorter of them too,’ said Valence, remembering those heaps in the tool-house.

‘ Oh, Mr. Rock, you really were very good. How your back must have ached over them !’

‘ Never mind what it did, Miss Dormer. I daresay you have said a good many foolish things in your life, but I know you have said one: that a clergyman had best stick to his sermon-book.’

‘ Please, don’t believe what Miss Pentwistle says again, Mr. Rock.’

‘ Yes, I shall, when something tells me it is true. I am indebted to that excellent woman for much light regarding your estimate of me. I was determined, when I heard that, that you should know, some day, how far my abilities extended in another direction. Now, don’t you think it is time you went back to the cottage? You see, having once begun plain speaking, I cannot trust myself not to go on with it.’

'Thank you very much,' said Valence, going up to the little man and putting out her hand to him. He took it with such a grip as she scarcely thought he could give.

'Is it thanks for the plain speaking, or for the not going on with it, Miss Dormer ?'

'I think it is for both.'

'Very well. I felt from the beginning that I must have a quarrel with you before we should understand each other. Now we have cleared the air, and perhaps we shall go on comfortably.'

'I hope you will forgive me, Mr. Rock, for having said what I did about your sermons.'

The curate turned about to his digging.

'I don't quite know what you said, but it doesn't signify. If it is true, you had a

right to say it. If it is not, I can soon knock it over.'

'I am sure you can do *that*,' said Valence, very humbly.

And then she walked away to the cottage, and Stephen Rock went on with the potato rows, feeling happier than he had ever done since he came into the parish.

CHAPTER XVII.

ANYONE meeting Lady Lowater a few weeks after that terrible disaster—though few people ever did meet her—would have noted little difference in her bearing and appearance. She had always been proud, silent, anxious-looking, with the restlessness of a hunted creature in her weary eyes. She was only that now. Mr. Rock, who saw more of her than anyone, except Valence, did not know what that look meant, but he did know that Lady Lowater was allowing him to come nearer to her, was showing by a quite new gentleness in

her manner towards him that she was willing to receive the little which any human being could give her of comfort or help.

Merrion's death had done this for her, that human pity could at last find way into her soul. And though the two people she loved best, Valence Dorner and Stephen Rock, could not reach her sharpest sorrow, not knowing of it, still their tenderness did steal down from time to time into that dark chamber where the secret of her life lay buried. Dark chamber indeed, unlighted hitherto by divine forgiveness or human sympathy. No forgiveness, where remorse only, not restitution, lifted its soiled hands to heaven. No sympathy when the darkest stain of all was covered by the slow lie of a whole life. It was the curse of this untruth which was doing Lady Lowater to her death.

Of course, people said it was the loss of

her child which bowed her down. A widowed mother might well die for that. With a strange eagerness the wretched woman seized upon that liberty to let her grief be known. The anguish of the deadlier wound might in some sort utter itself under cover of this, which all the world knew.

Now she could weep, and they would think she wept for the burning ship. Now she might shut herself up from friend and neighbour, and the cruel stroke which had bereft her of everything would bear the blame. Now, if a sigh, rising to a shriek, broke sometimes the stillness of the night in Lowater Court, those who heard it would not wonder, would only perhaps say a useless prayer for her and turn to sleep again.

And still in the sweet September evenings she used to go up to the rock-

seat, and there she would sit alone, looking out over the sea. And if sometimes a vessel, slowly moving across the bay, caught the sunset glow as if in a flame upon its sails, my lady would shiver, and there would come a light into her hollow eyes, and she would say to herself,

‘Life has done its worst for me.’

And there she would stay, far into the dark of night, thinking, still thinking. Life *had* done its worst. There was nothing left now for her to hold to. None called her dearest, none called her best. The past was cursed, the future was hopeless, the present was blank.

But also there was nothing left to fear. Death, taking from her her only treasure, had also snapped the only fetter by which her enemy held her in his power. Now let Clayton Antony do what he would, it could only touch herself. She could at

last defy the man who had held her in such bitter slavery all these years. That was freedom.

But the curse was upon her own soul still, in that she lived a lie, letting the world take her for what she was not. And this was what blasted her life. This was the wolf-hound which was tracking her to her grave, whilst people thought she only mourned her son.

‘Mr. Rock, are you sure you are faithful with her?’ Miss Pentwistle said, one day, when the curate had been pacing up and down with my lady for nearly an hour, by the lily-pond. ‘She is in a state of mind which seems to me to call for special plainness of speaking.’

‘We are all of us in that state of mind, Miss Pentwistle. I don’t know that plain speaking is a thing more necessary now

than at any other time for Lady Lowater. Indeed, I should say that prosperity is rather the time for directness of dealing, if people are not in the habit of using it always.'

' You are mistaken, Mr. Rock.' And Miss Pentwistle, who was in rather a bitter mood this morning, because of the very marked manner in which her own ministrations were set aside, and those of Valence Dormer preferred by Lady Lowater, felt that she must speak her mind out about people and things in general. And Mr. Rock, in virtue of his insignificant appearance and small stipend and paucity of pulpit talent, was a better scolding-block than any other that came in her way.

' You are mistaken, Mr. Rock. It is when people are flying in the face of Providence, as Lady Lowater is now, that

they need truth pressing home upon them. A strong hand is needed. The truest kindness is in plainness of speech. Excuse me, but are you sure that you are not shrinking from duty in this matter?’

Miss Pentwistle had encountered Mr. Rock in the bit of plantation between the lily-pond and the little brae that led down to Ben Dyson’s cottage. She had him fast, he could not pass her in the narrow footpath without absolute rudeness. She would give him a shaking, that she would. Somebody must have it, for there was an amount of fault-finding activity in her this morning, sufficient to produce a bilious attack, if not directed outwardly. And Mr. Rock always did tempt her so, poor little man!

‘I hope you will not think me uncharitable,’ she continued. ‘Of course it is very unpleasant to have to speak to a

clergyman in a manner which at all implies neglect of duty; but dear Lady Lowater's state of mind is so very painful, and is having such an effect upon her physical health, that I feel I must take up my cross and mention the subject to you.'

Mr. Rock planted himself against a tree and struck his stick down into the moss, and folded his arms across his chest and looked at his assailant. Evidently he did not want to get away from her this morning.

'Miss Pentwistle,' he said, 'if I have neglected my duty at all, I am afraid it is in not telling you what I think of your own state of mind.'

'Oh! well, then, do not shrink from *that*, Mr. Rock,' replied Miss Pentwistle, with great complacency. 'There is nothing I value in a minister more than faithful-

ness. I am always rejoiced to have anything mentioned to me. Of course that is how Christian perfection is to be attained.'

But something in Miss Pentwistle's manner intimated pretty distinctly that Christian perfection, as regarded herself, was not an attainment to be spoken of in the future tense. There *were* those, even in the midst of evil surroundings, who possessed what, for most other people, was only a possibility. Mr. Rock detected that something, and was silent. The Ethiop might change his skin sooner than Lady Lowater's companion cast off her comfortable assurance that she was all she ought to be.

'In fact,' she continued, 'I must tell you now that this want of faithfulness has sometimes appeared to me a drawback in your ministrations amongst the upper class people of this place. You have not suffi-

ciently pressed home upon them what I should call practical religion.'

'What is practical religion, Miss Pentwistle?'

'It is a becoming behaviour under all the conditions of life.'

As Miss Pentwistle said that, she turned upon Mr. Rock a look intended to convince him that, if he was seeking anyone who could give a practical illustration of such behaviour, he had come to the right quarter.

Mr. Rock returned the glance with one of amused curiosity. One did not often find a human soul so comfortably wrapped up in the cotton wool of complacency.

'And you know,' Miss Pentwistle continued, 'that is just where I think poor dear Lady Lowater fails. She has not received this stroke in a becoming spirit. She rebels under it; she rebels sadly. And

that prevents her from finding peace. Indeed, how can she find peace when she refuses comfort ?'

' You mean, I suppose, that she has not listened patiently enough to the cart-loads of common-place which her friends and neighbours have thought proper to inflict upon her in connection with her trouble. Instead, she has chosen to struggle with it in silence. Has she uttered a word of complaint to you ?'

' Oh, dear, no, not a syllable. In fact, she never approaches the subject, nor, I may say, allows me to approach it. I felt it my duty to be faithful from the first, and it is possible my desire to do right may have offended her. If so, I can only feel that satisfaction which arises from the consciousness of having done what is proper.'

' You don't see much of her now, do you ?'

'No,' said Miss Pentwistle, with a touch of temper. 'And I think I may say that during our five-minutes' intercourse every morning after breakfast, the conversation is limited to the merest details of house-keeping. I must own I feel it sometimes. I am, in fact, little more than a speaking tube for conveying Lady Lowater's wishes to the servants.'

'Perhaps it is the being made a speaking tube that disqualifies you for criticism,' said Mr. Rock, drily. 'But, if practical religion consists in a becoming behaviour under all the conditions of life, one should ask oneself whether yours at present is not a fine opportunity for practising the becomingness.'

'I do not quite understand you, Mr. Rock;' and Miss Pentwistle put on her dignity. Instead of this obnoxious little curate getting a shaking, he seemed to be

taking matters into his own hands after a fashion closely bordering upon impertinence. And that he did not want to get away was evident, for he stood there leaning against the tree with his arms folded, as if he meant to make an afternoon of it. Such an expression, too, upon his face of being master of the situation. He must really be brought to his bearings. Going to the Court so frequently, being taken up by Lady Lowater almost as an intimate, after years of comparative neglect, had been too much for him. He was losing his head. Miss Pentwistle thought she had better change the conversation, still, however, keeping it in a channel from which a current of wholesome reproof might from time to time be turned upon him.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MISS PENTWISTLE gathered her shawl round her, and in a general way straightened herself. If Mr. Rock wished to make his escape now, she would allow him to do so without further molestation. Otherwise she could go on.

But he showed no disposition to move. Instead, he planted himself a little more firmly, if possible, against the tree. So Miss Pentwistle returned to the charge.

‘Dyson appears to be growing weaker. I have noticed a change in him during the last month.’

‘I daresay you have. A second stroke of paralysis.’

‘Indeed! poor man! Very painful! The next, I suppose, will be fatal. You see him regularly, of course?’

‘Quite regularly,’ said the curate, with a smile.

‘I hope Miss Dormer does not forget her duty to him.’ And this time there was not only temper, but acidity, in the lady’s voice. ‘She is so unremitting in her attentions at the Court that I have sometimes feared her grandfather might suffer.’

‘Then you may dismiss your fears. Miss Dormer knows as well as most people what is the duty that lies nearest to her, and I don’t think she needs either your help or mine in doing it.’

Miss Pentwistle drew herself up. The little man was really taking too much upon himself.

'I begin to suspect,' she said, with a sneer, 'that Miss Dormer will not have to look far for a home when her grandfather is removed. Lady Lowater was so exceedingly kind in providing one for her when she left Mrs. Antony that possibly the offer will be renewed when necessary.'

Miss Pentwistle felt she was justified in saying as much as this. She had been so very much left out in the cold since Lady Lowater's affliction, and Valence Dormer, this friend of a few weeks, had been so warmly welcomed, that human nature must be allowed to express itself. And then Miss Dormer had never been sufficiently conscious of her change of position. She held her head as loftily now as when she was a visitor at the Court itself.

Stephen Rock came a step nearer to her.

'You mean that you think Miss Dormer is trying to supplant you?'

‘That is exactly what she is trying to do, Mr. Rock. You have expressed it in my own words. You see, after all, she has a great deal of her mother’s cleverness. Family characteristics do transmit themselves. I must say that now I am beginning——’

‘Miss Pentwistle,’ interrupted Mr. Rock, ‘are you not sorry for Mrs. Antony?’

Miss Pentwistle stared at the ridiculous little curate, simply stared at him.

‘Sorry? Mr. Rock, sorry? I think what happened to her is perfectly refreshing. I should have considered that a premium had been offered to crime if she had gone unpunished. I never saw justice more clearly manifested. Sorry, indeed! The discovery of her deceit filled me with thankfulness.’

‘You had found out all about it, had you not, when you took her to see that

bit of carving in the back kitchen of the Court?’

‘I had,’ said Miss Pentwistle, triumphantly, ‘and I had decided that that should be the way in which her duplicity should be exposed, in the presence of the very people whom she had, up to that time, so successfully swindled.’

‘Had she injured you in any way, Miss Pentwistle?’

‘Oh! dear, no. I never came into actual collision with Mrs. Antony. I considered her excessively rude to me on several occasions, after Lady Lowater began to take a little notice of her, and I was determined she should suffer for it; but I would not go so far as to call that injury. I hope I have too much common-sense and Christianity.’

‘I am afraid we must not say too much about Christianity in connection with the

affair—at least, so far as you are concerned,’ said Mr. Rock, with an energy rather unusual. ‘Now, look here, Miss Pentwistle.’

And it was the curate this time who planted himself so exactly in the middle of the narrow path that Miss Pentwistle could not, without personal force, get past him.

‘Look here. You told me just now that I was not sufficiently faithful in pressing home upon people their individual shortcomings. You shall not have to say that any more in respect of yourself. If you remember, we once had a discussion about eternal realities.’

‘Yes,’ said Miss Pentwistle, hastily, ‘and I am so exceedingly sorry not to have had time since to give the subject a serious consideration. You see, the succession of garden-parties, and then this terrible catas-

trophe ; but I quite hope before long to be able to note down a few remarks, and then at some future opportunity, perhaps—'

‘No, not at any future opportunity. I will say what I have to say now. If we believe in immortality at all, the only eternal reality which concerns us in connection with it is, as I said before, the building up from day to day of that house of character in which we are for ever to dwell. This, and no other, is the house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.’

‘Mr. Rock ;’ and Miss Pentwistle tightened her shawl, as well she might in the presence of such audacity. ‘You are preaching dependence upon our own works. I cannot listen to you.’

‘You must listen to me. I am not preaching dependence upon anything. I

am speaking of the house we are to live in when the earthly house of our body is decayed, and I say that we must build it ourselves.'

Was ever a clergyman in such outer darkness? thought Miss Pentwistle to herself. The bishop must certainly be written to about it. She was conscious of a rapid mental process, concluding in a private letter to the archdeacon, before she replied.

'Build it for ourselves, Mr. Rock? Oh, no. Another must do that for us.'

'Miss Pentwistle,' said the curate quietly. 'Another will never do for us a single thing that we can do for ourselves. Our strength is given us, and the material to work with, in spiritual as in material things. And, as we build, so we must abide. And now I tell you, and I dare you to deny it, that into this house of

character, within which you must pass your whole existence, both here and hereafter, you are building nothing but the rubbish of your own self-righteousness, rubbish which the very first blast of God Almighty's breath upon it will sweep utterly away.'

'Mr. Rock ! I beg you to remember to whom you are speaking.'

'I do remember it, Miss Pentwistle ;' and Mr. Rock's face gathered eagerness and his voice strength as he went on. 'I am speaking to a so-called Christian woman, who is eaten up with spiritual pride, a woman who thinks it her mission to sit in judgment upon others, whilst her own heart is full of uncleanness and greediness, a woman who has yet to learn the first principles of religion, in turning from dead works to serve the living God. You have dared me to speak to you faithfully, and

you shall hear me whilst I say that this house of character, which you have made for yourself, will abide neither storm of winter nor heat of summer. You have laid its foundations in pharisaic complacency, you have built its walls of uncharitableness; its windows are pride, its roof ignorance, its gates selfishness. I tell you it will perish, perish utterly; and well for you if it perish in time for you to build something more worthy upon a better foundation.'

'Mr. Rock!' exclaimed Miss Pentwistle, almost choking with ineffectual rage, 'may I ask you to explain yourself.'

'You may,' said the curate, moving not a step from his vantage ground in the very middle of the path, and waxing more and more audacious as he proceeded with the deliverance of his opinions. 'To explain myself is exactly what I wish to do, if my

meaning is not already sufficiently clear. You call yourself a Christian, and you hint that you are a perfect one, one who lives by the law of love, and will die, when the time comes, in the odour of sanctity. Look, then. Here is a woman, mean truly, and enough to be pitied for her falsehood and her pettiness, but by your own showing she has never done you any harm, yet to gratify your spitefulness, to plaster up what you think your wounded dignity, you hunt her down, step by step, and at last rejoice in the degradation which overtakes her in the company of those amongst whom she had moved as an equal.'

‘Mr. Rock, it was the due reward of her evil deeds. Talk to me, indeed, of—’

But the curate rushed on with his torrent of indignation, never so much as heeding her interruption.

‘And you do all this, not that the ends of justice may be accomplished, not that truth may be vindicated and guilt punished, but that your own malice may be satisfied. Her sin against God you have not so much as looked at, only her misbehaviour in not paying your insignificant self all the honour you thought due unto you. This, then, is your charity that rejoiceth not in iniquity. Valence Dormer is doing her duty, like the noblest woman on God’s earth; stooping to the companionship of a peasant, and tending him with a daughter’s love and faithfulness; yet because you think——’

‘Mr. Rock, will you allow me to pass? How long am I to listen to this?’

‘Until I have finished. Because you think she may supplant you in Lady Lowater’s interest, you charge her with the basest of motives in her kindness to a

desolate woman. This is your love which thinketh no evil. Here is a mother who has suffered the loss of all things which could give brightness to the present or hope to the future, and because she chooses to be alone with God and with her grief; because she cannot endure the perpetual dropping of your own inanities, you must needs call her defiant and rebellious. This is your kindness, your long-suffering, your patience of the saints. I tell you, Miss Pentwistle, that your religion is a lie; that all your fair-seeming is hypocrisy, and that the only eternal reality possible for you is the bitterness of disappointment for ever.'

Miss Pentwistle could only keep drawing her shawl tighter and tighter, until it almost rent in twain above the tumult of impotent wrath which was seething in her breast. Had the little man been tak-

ing an overdose of anything? Or was he subject to visitations of mania? Perhaps she had better try the effect of dignified calm.

‘Mr. Rock, I am exceedingly sorry for you. I fear you are not in your right mind. Possibly my references to Miss Dormer, in the former part of our conversation, have fallen upon delicate ground.’

‘Never mind your references to Miss Dormer. They do not affect me in the least,’ replied the curate, with almost insolent carelessness. ‘All that I am concerned about now, is what sort of ground my references to *your* conduct are falling upon; and I think *that* ground is neither delicate nor doubtful. Miss Pentwistle, if I said as much as this to you from the pulpit—said it to you as one only amongst the congregation—you would perhaps do me the credit of calling me

faithful in the discharge of my ministerial duty. But, because I tell you the truth personally, tell it to yourself who need it, whether you will take it to heart or not, you call me crazy. And, truly, it might make a man so, to be commanded to bow down to a righteousness which loves itself and despises the sinner ; which can see no way into the Kingdom of Heaven but through its own little gate of idle self-sufficiency ; which asks for nothing but to have its own merit acknowledged, and its own claims to everlasting life made sure. Not in my right mind ? No, truly, I were not in my right mind if I could walk side by side with you on this path, which you have made for yourself, to that far-off land, wherein nothing that loveth or maketh a lie can enter. And now, good morning, Miss Pentwistle ; and, if I have spoken the

truth too plainly to you, I have done it at your own request.'

Raising his hat, the curate stepped aside, and Miss Pentwistle made her escape with an uncomfortable consciousness that the shaking this time had been on the wrong part.

Mr. Rock did his usual afternoon work in the village and looked over his sermon for the next Sunday, and then finished the day, as he often did now, at the cottage by the brae. Sometimes there was work to do in the garden, he doing most of it. If not, he would sit by the old man's side and cheer him up, Valence going about her work with a step lighter and a brow more free from care than when she had been Lady Lowater's guest, amidst the ancestral magnificence of the Court. And Stephen, watching her, won-

dered if she knew why he came so often ; for as yet his courage had failed him when he tried to tell her. And whether she needed anything that he could give, and whether the life she lived filled up the measure of her desires, and whether she ever looked beyond to the days of loneliness which must sooner or later come, he knew not. Only this he knew, that, if she could not love him, there was nothing left but for him to go companionless to the end.

But that night, as they two stood in the porch, and all was silent about them, and far away across the plantation one little light in an upper window showed where Miss Pentwistle was brooding over her discomfiture, Stephen Rock, holding Valence's hand in his, searched her face, love's hunger and waiting and patience in his own, and he said only this :

‘Valence, Valence:’

‘Not yet,’ said the girl. And she looked past him into the chamber where old Ben Dyson lay and slept, breathing heavily.

‘Not yet.’

But she had let her hand rest in his as she said it. And there was hope in Stephen Rock’s heart, and strength and gladness, as he took his way through the dark to a home which could never be lonely any more now.

CHAPTER XIX.

SOMETIMES in the late evenings, when all was quiet and still in the park, my lady would steal out alone through the plantations, and go down the brae to the cottage, and sit for an hour with Valence Dormer in the cosy little kitchen, after old Ben was asleep. She was meaning to do so that same evening when a spirit in his feet led Stephen Rock in the same direction. And it so chanced that she was standing on the brae, in the darkness, looking down into the cottage garden, when he came out of the porch and Va-

lence with him, and he had called her by her name.

Then Lady Lowater had turned aside and come quietly home. Next night she came again. Valence was busy with her sewing. The old man slept. There were lilies on the table, lilies that grew nowhere but in Stephen Rock's garden by the church. My lady knew them, for she had often stayed in passing, to wonder at their whiteness and beauty.

Lady Lowater had quite given over pitying Valence for the change that had come into her life. She had watched her closely, and she knew that it was not a life to be pitied.

‘But it will change by-and-by, Valence,’ she said. ‘Death will come. They say your grandfather cannot last much longer. And I must go. The Court is no home for me now. And new people will

have new ways, and another woodman will come to live here, and what will you do ?'

'I can go back to Hurchester, if that is all,' said Valence.

And as she said it there came a smile on her face, which she would not let Lady Lowater see. But my lady knew it was there, all the same.

'And is that all you want, Valence ?'

'There is no need for me to think what I want. As I said before, so long as I have work to do and a place to work in, I can be content. And that people should know me for what I am.'

'Yes,' said Lady Lowater, rather bitterly, 'I remember you said that.'

'And people *do* know me for what I am now,' the girl continued. 'As soon as I found that I was not what I thought myself, I came here, that there might be no mistake about who I was.'

‘Valence,’ said Lady Lowater, abruptly, for these words came too near her heart and its misery, ‘did you ever find out who did all that garden work for you?’

‘Yes, it was Mr. Rock.’

And, after a pause, she went on.

‘Mr. Rock is one of the best men that ever I knew.’

My lady smiled. She could smile sometimes, and sweetly too.

‘Valence, *you* say that, and you used to say he was one of the feeblest! I thought you looked down upon him, as you did upon most clergymen, thinking they were good for little but to talk in church, and behave prettily out of it.’

Valence coloured.

‘Yes, I did say so. I thought he was just one of the ordinary sort, who lay commonplaces together in heaps, like stones by the road-side, any quantity of

them. But I know now that he is a man who can do, as well as say. He puts his preaching into his life, and his life into his preaching. I am ashamed of myself for being so unjust, and I have told him so, and now I tell you the same.'

'I am glad you have told him, Valence. He is a man who can be helped by knowing that people trust him. And now I will go home.'

'Let me go with you, Lady Lowater. It is so late and so dark.'

'I daresay; and it will be later and darker for you to come back, after you have been with me. No, I am accustomed to be alone in the dark now. Good-night.'

'Well, there is one thing,' said Valence, as she came to the garden-gate with her, 'you are on your own ground all the time.'

My lady said nothing to that, only

stepped, grave and quiet as any queen, along the little narrow path towards the plantation. Valence might almost know, so sharply did her innocent words smite down sometimes upon the heart whose secret ate like a canker.

A thought came into Lady Lowater's mind that night, as she went home in the dark.

‘They are both very poor,’ she said to herself, ‘and they must wait long. I have done evil things. I will do one kind thing before I die.’

Next morning she said, with just a touch of brightness in her face and manner,

‘Jennings, I wish this note to be taken to Mr. Antony’s office.’

‘Yes, my lady,’ said the good-hearted waiting-woman, delighted to see in her mistress any sign of returning interest in life and its business. ‘I’ll see that it goes

this very minute. One of the men is just off to Byborough, for shoeing the horses. But it isn't Mr. Antony that will get it, my lady. He's been away with Mrs. Antony this nearly three months, and, by what the servants say, there's no telling when he's expected back.'

'Never mind, Jennings. Mr. Leybourne will get it, and that will do just as well.'

Next morning Mr. Leybourne came. And two or three days later he came again, bringing a clerk with him; and, after he had been a little while with my lady in the library, old Colonel Pontifex was sent for out of the village.

Miss Pentwistle, who very soon found out all that was going on, felt sure that it was a business document that was being signed—in fact, Lady Lowater's will. Sir Merrion's death would naturally make a difference in the leaving of the money

which was at her ladyship's disposal. Having lived so quietly for over twenty years, property must have accumulated, quite apart from the land ; and, now that there was no child for it, it would have to be apportioned elsewhere.

Elsewhere. Now, if Miss Pentwistle could but gain a little information about the elsewhere. But Jennings was a silent woman, and as for Miss Pentwistle herself, she never had a chance of speaking to Lady Lowater, except on matters connected with the housekeeping. She might say she had become a complete nonentity. If she had hunted out that affair of Mrs. Antony, and brought everything to light on purpose that young Sir Merrion might get burnt to death on the *Arethusa*, Lady Lowater could not have more studiously avoided her. Miss Pentwistle began to be afraid her prospects might suffer.

It was a pity Mr. Antony was not at home. She could always, by judicious management, get on the right side of him. Only a short time before his marriage, he had told her, when she was consulting him about the disposition of some of her little savings, that, after fifteen years of constant and faithful companionship, she would be sure to find herself handsomely remembered in Lady Lowater's will. Indeed, he assured her that he should mention it himself, and see that proper justice was done to her. And everyone knew that Lady Lowater, proud, independent woman that she was, always had to give in, sooner or later, to Mr. Antony. How it was, they did not know, but so it certainly was.

And now Mr. Leybourne had been sent for to make the will—Mr. Leybourne whom she scarcely so much as knew by sight, and who had not the remotest in-

terest in seeing that she was properly remembered. What had her ladyship decided upon? Was it a codicil, now that poor Sir Merrion was gone? And was she doing anything for Miss Dormer? For the girl seemed to have infatuated her. No, it could scarcely be so bad as that. The services of fifteen years and more would scarcely be put aside for the whim of a few weeks' acquaintance. Then was Miss Dormer going to be remembered at all? The possibility of that was as gall and vinegar to the excellent woman who had been doing her duty so faithfully ever since she came into the establishment. As for making inquiries, that was impossible. She must just hold her peace, and watch her opportunity for catching a little information, if it oozed out accidentally.

And still my lady went about with that look of haggard misery upon her face. A

gleam of brightness might pass over it from time to time, but there it was, grey, hopeless as ever, when the momentary relief had vanished. Still through the late September twilight she would sit alone, always alone now, upon that bit of cliff overlooking the sea. Miss Pentwistle, knowing where she went, had once or twice contrived to slip out as if by accident and be there before her, or had overtaken her as she was going wearily up the path, and offered her arm, even if her conversation was not required. But Lady Lowater had said, with a look of annoyance, almost disdain,

‘I would rather be alone, thank you; it never hurts me to be alone.’

Of course there was no doing anything with her after that. And later on my lady intimated her wishes in a still more unmistakable manner. For, before she

started upon her solitary walks she would send a message by Jennings into the library, where Miss Pentwistle sat.

‘If you please, ma’am, her ladyship’s compliments, and she would rather no one went into the west plantation. She is going for a walk, and she wishes to be alone.’

‘Oh! certainly, Jennings. I shall not think of going in that direction. But I do not know why Lady Lowater should avoid me. Do you?’

‘Oh, dear, no, ma’am, not in the least. She is only the same with you as she is with all of us, ma’am; a word, and sometimes scarcely that, and then wants to be quiet again. I daresay it’s nothing but trouble makes her like to keep herself to herself. And, if people take it that way, they’re best let alone.’

‘Miss Dormer appears to be the favoured

one now, Jennings,' remarked Miss Pentwistle, with an air of asperity.

‘Yes, ma’am, she spends a deal of time at the cottage, and it seems to comfort her. Over and over again she says to me, “Jennings, fetch my things ; I am going to sit with Miss Dormer,” and I’m always glad to hear her say it, for if ever she has a bit of comfort in her face at all, it’s when she’s been having a talk with the young lady. Or maybe Mr. Rock. He seems to do a deal for her now, does Mr. Rock, for all she was never one that went much to church like the most of people. Then you’ll remember, ma’am, it’s the west plantation her ladyship’s gone to, and doesn’t wish to be disturbed.’

‘I will remember,’ Miss Pentwistle would reply, stiffly, and there it ended.

Mr. Rock and Miss Dormer. Just the very worst people for her ladyship to

gather comfort from. Miss Pentwistle wondered whether Mr. Rock had ever told her about that conversation in the path leading to the lily-pond. She had not spoken to him since—did not intend to do so until he had made an ample apology for his impertinence, the insolent, overbearing little fellow. To think of his standing there before her in the middle of the path, and pouring out such a torrent of abuse, actual personal abuse, which might almost have brought him into a court-of-law. As he said, if the same meaning had been conveyed in general terms from the pulpit, one would have felt that he was perfectly justified in delivering his conscience with regard to the parish generally; for no doubt there was a great deal of hollowness in religious profession, quite enough to call for any amount of plain speaking. But to make her, one of the most regular

attendants on public worship, and one of the most assiduous visitors of the poor in Lowater, a scapegoat, as it were, for the sins of the whole congregation, was simply an insult. Mr. Rock must not be allowed to think *that* the way in which his duties as a faithful pastor were to be discharged.

And Miss Pentwistle's hand shook, positively shook, with impotent wrath, as she added up her accounts there in the library of Lowater Court.

CHAPTER XX.

IT was about a week later that my Lady Lowater, still with the same look of hopeless misery upon her face, took her solitary way up to the rock-seat after dark.

She could not see the breaking waves, only hear them far away down upon the rocks beneath. Where, a few hours ago, under calm sunlight, the blue sea had touched the bluer sky, as time and eternity meet upon the clear horizon line of death, there was now only the blackness and gloom of night, blackness and gloom like those in her own soul, save that for her

no sunlight ever came, nor even dawn enough to show that dim horizon line, once passing which the wicked cease from troubling and the weary are at rest.

She had said to herself a while ago, standing there alone in the dark, that she would do her best. That meant for her only one thing, and she had not been able to do it yet.

‘Anything but that,’ she murmured, as she came down from the mountain-top of resolve. ‘Anything but that. It is too bitter. I cannot do it.’

So, instead of that, she had tried to ease her conscience by a deed of kindness to Valence Dormer and Stephen Rock. No child of her own now to take the savings which need not go with the land, she had left nearly all to them. That would surely cover a little of her sin. To make two people happy; to enable them

to live out their life in what for them would be almost wealth, after the grinding poverty of so many years, might not this stand for the 'best,' whose doing could alter no life now?

There was a great silence round her as she stood there on the high ground overlooking the sea. It seemed as though all Nature were waiting, listening to hear what she would say.

'Oh! I cannot, I cannot,' she murmured again.

And she turned and came down the path, staggering at every step, her hands helplessly stretched forth, her eyes wide open, but seeing nothing; tearless, hot, dry. And so she reached the Court again, and, steadying herself by the oaken balustrades, she went upstairs into the long corridor, at the end of which was her own room.

Jennings, waiting and watchful, stood there, ready to give just so much help as her mistress seemed to want, no more.

To rest herself for a while, and that she might not appear to tremble, Lady Lowater paused in front of one of the portraits. It was herself and Merrion, Merrion the laughing little boy of years ago, with his tossing, golden locks, and his fair, open brow, and his fearless gaze into the future, let it bring him what it might; Merrion, his ashes strewn now over the drifting sea, not even a grave given him, where those he loved could weep. And herself? Oh! if over any waves the ashes of that poor body, so worn and weary, could be scattered.

‘They were very like us, once, were they not, Jennings?’ she said, carelessly, as she steadied herself by the pedestal of a Juno a little on one side of the picture.

‘As good as life itself, my lady,’ replied Jennings, looking only at the picture, for pity’s sake not at the haggard woman near it.

‘And everyone says, Jennings, that Sir Merrion was very like his mother.’

‘Everyone, my lady. You know, it’s the housekeeper that takes the most of visitors round to see the pictures; and I have heard her say that nearly everyone remarks how little there is of the Lowaters about Sir Merrion.’

‘Ah! they say that, do they?’

‘Indeed they do, my lady; and anyone who has eyes may see it for themselves. The Lowaters are mostly dark, and very broad-set, but not to say tall; and Sir Merrion has just your own make. It was clear to tell he took after your ladyship’s side of the family. Not a bit of Sir Guy about him.’

‘I am ready now, Jennings.’

And my lady walked more firmly to her own room. There, she said, she would be left alone for a while, in her great easy-chair by the window. And Jennings was to draw aside the curtains, that, later, she might see the waning moon rise over Ben Dyson’s cottage.

‘And do not come again, Jennings, until the morning. I shall perhaps sit here a long time. I want to be quiet.’

‘Yes, my lady. But it will be no trouble to me to come to you at any time. I am a light sleeper, especially when your ladyship is not well, and a call will wake me. I don’t like your being alone.’

‘It is nothing new, Jennings. I know you are near, and so it is all right. Now good-night.’

And there, long after the waning moon had risen, a feeble, broken thing behind the

thatched gables of the woodman's cottage, Lady Lowater sat with her face buried in her hands. Sometimes she would lift herself up for awhile, and stare out into the half-dark. Sometimes she would stretch forth her hands as if pleading with some unseen presence. Then she would crouch down again with a low, bitter moan.

‘Oh, I cannot, I cannot!’

Then she got up and lighted a lamp and fetched a worn Bible from a drawer in her dressing-table. It opened at the book of Job, where the pages were as if stained with many tears. And she read,

‘Are not my days few? Let me alone, that I may take comfort a little.

‘Before I go whence I shall not return, even to the land of darkness and the shadow of death.

‘A land of darkness as darkness itself, and of the shadow of death, without any

order, and where the light is as darkness.'

Then she paused ; then began again :

'Terrors shall make him afraid on every side, and shall drive him to his feet.

'His strength shall be hunger-bitten, and destruction shall be ready at his side.

'His remembrance shall perish from the earth, and he shall have no name in the street.

'He shall neither have son nor nephew among his people, nor any remaining in his dwellings.

'This is the place of him that knoweth not God.'

Later still a grey light crept up from the east. Little birds began to twitter in the ivy outside the window. By-and-by level rays of sunlight smote through the larch-tree branches, and turned to diamond and emerald the dewdrops that glistened

on the spiders' webs all over the lawn. Then the wood-pigeons' murmur was heard in the plantation. Then the mist rolled away, and a clear, fine line of blue, with one white sail upon it, showed beyond the crimsoning chestnut leaves.

‘I will do it! I will do it!’

Lady Lowater said that. And she drew the curtains and lay down and slept, or seemed to sleep when Jennings came in the morning.

That same day, before nightfall, she sent for Mr. Rock. He stayed long with her. What she told him no one ever knew. Only Jennings, watching him go out down the little path towards the brae, noticed that he too went like a blind man, not seeing whither he went, and that his feet stumbled over the mossy stones, though he should have known them so well.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE next day my lady kept her room. She was very tired, she said, and would rest awhile.

And next day Jennings noticed what she emphatically called 'a change' in her mistress's face. Something had gone out of it, she could not tell what ; and instead, there was a look of patient calm, nay, more than that, a light as of something beautiful shining through.

Jennings took no counsel with anyone, but sent for the old family doctor. She had a feeling that that strange sweetness and quietness meant the coming of death.

And she felt it the more because, in addition to the quietness, my lady would now let herself be tended and waited upon as she had never done before.

Dr. Martindale came, asked a few questions, prescribed tonic draughts, freedom from any kind of worry, and afterwards, when her ladyship had recovered her strength a little, change of air. He quite understood the case, had attended many of the same kind before, abnormal strain upon the nervous system, reaction after too violent an effort to repress the natural emotions, temporary collapse of the vital powers. Quiet, simple diet, fresh air, and cheerful companionship would set her right in a few weeks, he hoped. But she must be carefully nursed, and, above all, she must not be left alone to brood upon the terrible trial through which she had so lately passed.

‘Let Valence come to me,’ she said.
And Valence came.

But no one knew except Stephen Rock, and he never told any of them, why that wonderful patience of hope had replaced the stony misery of so many years. Rest of the overwrought spirit, they thought, which had let itself give way at last; physical weakness, breaking down the pride of the strong will. For everyone knew how the body did act upon the mind, and how, the armour of brain and nerve power being unloosed, the very character which had been held together by it seemed to change, to show itself for what it really was, apart from the ordinary conditions of life.

At any rate, Dr. Martindale so interpreted the wonderful change which had come over my lady, and he made careful notes of the case as an interesting con-

tribution to psychological science. Stephen Rock looked at it differently. He knew that the spell which held the poor, tired soul back from the good deliverance of death had been broken. Now the messenger had leave to come, and full gladly she was following him.

Jennings was relieved that her mistress had allowed herself to give way at last. Even death itself, if that was to be the end, was better than the proud, hard misery which had so long refused to be comforted.

‘You see, sir,’ she said to the doctor, when for about a fortnight Lady Lowater had kept her room, only moving in the daytime to the couch by the window, from which she could look out to the cottage and the rock-seat and the blue sea beyond. ‘You see, sir, she lets us wait upon her now, so as it’s a pleasure

and a privilege both. She's given up her stiffness at last. She couldn't bear to let us see what she was suffering since the poor young master met his death, for she was that sort that wouldn't be pitied by anybody living. But now she's as sweet and patient, and seems to like us to be about her, so long as it isn't Miss Pentwistle. If Miss Pentwistle comes near, she seems to be, as you may say, ruffled and uncomfortable.'

'Then, Jennings, Miss Pentwistle must not come near. In a case like this, everything depends upon keeping the patient's mind at rest. I am much disappointed that Lady Lowater has not regained her strength more satisfactorily, as there is no active disease for us to fight against; but, if she has been subject to a disturbing influence, that may account for it. I have known nervous people entirely hin-

dered from recovery because of some prejudice against their nurses or attendants. But I always thought her ladyship got on remarkably well with Miss Pentwistle.'

'Oh! dear, yes, sir, nobody more so, and always were very pleasant and agreeable with each other. Only, you see, Miss Pentwistle being so much mixed up with that unpleasantness about Mrs. Antony, seems to have given my lady rather a turn. I fancy, you know, sir, she is always reminded of it now, if Miss Pentwistle comes into the room. It was a great worry to my lady, was that business about Mrs. Antony.'

'Yes, yes, most annoying, most annoying. The woman was a perfect swindler. I don't wonder Lady Lowater hates the sight of anyone connected with her. But I should have thought, in that case, Miss Dormer would have exercised a more dis-

turbing influence than Miss Pentwistle.'

'No, sir, nothing of the sort. There isn't anybody she sets such store by as Miss Dormer, unless it might be Mr. Rock. And, when the young lady is beside her, I always feel sure that everything will be right, so long as Miss Pentwistle doesn't come about. But, sir, it is a curious thing, my lady knows as well if she's in the room, though she never comes nigh-hand the bed or the sofa. The other day I was set watching her myself as she lay sleeping, and a broken sleep it was too, and didn't seem to do her a bit of good, always such a twitching and a fid-getting; and at last she wide opened her eyes, and said to me, as sharp like, "Jennings, there is something in the room that disturbs me," and with that Miss Pentwistle slipped out. She'd been sitting as quiet as quiet for a good half hour, read-

ing her book, and me, with all my senses about me, had never heard her though I knew she was there.'

'Ah! yes. Curious case, but not at all singular. Magnetic attractions and repulsions, you know; or rather, I should say, you don't know, not having been in the way of things of this kind. At the same time it is of the utmost importance to preserve her ladyship from any such disturbing currents. You must see to it that no one attends upon her but yourself and Miss Dorner. I will not be answerable for the consequences, if in her present state she is exposed to anything that ruffles or excites the nervous system. I have not the slightest doubt that it is something of the sort which is retarding her recovery at present.'

And Dr. Martindale went home, and wrote a paper about it for the *Lancet*. A

singular case, a very singular case ; curious instance, first of the power of the body over the mind, and then of the mind over the body.

So Valence Dormer and Jennings kept their watch now undisturbed in that room at the west end of the Court, where Lady Lowater lay so quietly, with such a strange patient look upon her face.

‘It’s my opinion she won’t get over it, ma’am,’ said Jennings to Miss Pentwistle, one morning when Mr. Rock was alone with her ladyship. ‘She don’t seem to get on a bit, but quite the other way. You don’t notice it so much from day to day, but, if you look back a week or a fortnight, you see a difference then, and it isn’t a difference of the right sort.’

‘Nonsense, Jennings ! Being shut up there with her from morning to night, you get low-spirited about her. Dr. Martin-

dale says himself that she has no disease whatever, she is simply suffering from prostration of the nervous system. She wants cheerful companionship. That is what she wants. It is simply ridiculous of him to say I ought not to be much with her. It is my belief she talks to Miss Dormer about nothing but Sir Merrion and the *Arethusa*.'

‘I don’t know, ma’am, what they talk about. I never hear her mention Sir Merrion myself, but then Miss Dormer spends hours with her to my one, and, feeling that my lady is comfortable with her, I am content. But whether it’s disease or not, ma’am, sure I am of this, that my lady would never have given in as she has done for us to do for her and wait upon her, if she hadn’t known there would be an end of it soon. She’s never, all these years that I’ve been at the Court,

taken anything from me that she could help herself to as well, and it means a great deal for her to drop it all now. There will be a change in this house, ma'am, before long.'

'Of course, Jennings, we all know that. I believe her ladyship wishes to become accustomed by degrees to wait upon herself, as she will have to do when we remove to the dower-house. There cannot be such an establishment of servants kept up then. I expect we shall have to depend upon ourselves pretty well.'

'My lady shall never want anything that I have been accustomed to do for her, ma'am, as long as I have my two hands to do it for her. Whatever difference is made in the rest of the service, I shall see to that. But it isn't anything of that sort that my lady is looking to.'

And Jennings wiped two genuine tears

out of her shrewd, observant eyes. Miss Pentwistle replied, in her usual matter-of-fact way,

‘Lady Lowater has made her will, I suppose? If not, something ought to be said to her about it. Such matters should never be left until the last. I thought perhaps, when Mr. Leybourne came the other day, it might be on some business of that sort.’

‘I believe it was, ma’am. Her will has been made this many years past, but this was a codicil she wanted putting to it. She told me it herself, ma’am, so that I’m not afraid to speak.’

‘Ah! indeed,’ said Miss Pentwistle. ‘A codicil. Then I suppose it was some change that had been suggested to her. It is rather strange that she should have said nothing to me about it, and so much as I have always had to do with money matters

in the house. And I suppose that was why old Colonel Pontifex came ?'

' Very likely, ma'am, but, being no business of mine, I did not ask. And my lady was always one to know her own mind about things, without being interfered with.'

' You say she is more cheerful now, Jennings ?'

' Well, yes, ma'am, so to speak, within the last few days.'

' Well, then, I shall take the opportunity of having a little conversation with her. I would not on any account have her think that I am not paying every possible attention. Tell her that I will come up this evening, for an hour or so.'

' Excuse me, ma'am, but Dr. Martindale was very particular that nobody was to be let worry her about anything.'

' Worry her indeed ! I am not going to

do anything of the sort, Jennings. I am not a stranger in the house to need telling when I am to go and when I am to stay away. It has never struck me until just now, that Lady Lowater may consider my absence from her room as a want of respect. Tell her, if you please, that I am longing to have a little chat with her, whenever she feels able to bear it. It is nonsense, you know, utter nonsense to keep her shut up in this way, as if she were recovering from a fever, and everything depended upon perfect seclusion.'

Jennings replied, respectfully, but very firmly,

' Well, ma'am, all I can say is, I have my orders, and I must go upon them. Doctor Martindale will be here to-night, and I would rather you spoke to him yourself about it, than me.'

With that Jennings went back to her

mistress, for Mr. Rock was coming away from the west-room. And again Miss Pentwistle felt she was baffled. There was nothing for it but waiting and being patient.

CHAPTER XXII.

A CODICIL. That sounded ominous. For if she had been remembered, as she quite hoped she had been, in the body of the will, Lady Lowater's behaviour to her of late had not been such as to give much hope that she would benefit by any provisions which were now being made in consequence of Sir Merrion's untimely death. Had that death occurred only a few months earlier, before all these new complications arose, most probably her own income would have experienced a very pleasant augmentation. It might do

so even yet, but there were grave reasons for doubt.

Lady Lowater was coming more and more under the influence of Valence Dormer and Mr. Rock. It might be collusion —she thought it *was* collusion between them. Valence Dormer was a clever, capable girl, and, as such, could take advantage of her opportunities as sole nurse to an invalid who was just in the condition to have her feelings worked upon. And there was not the least doubt now that Miss Dormer was taking up with Mr. Rock. Naturally enough, knowing that her grandfather's life hung, as one might say, upon a hair, and that she would soon have to look out for a new home for herself, she was willing to take the very modest one which the perpetual curate was able to offer. Rather a contrast to what she had aimed at before, when Lo-

water Court was the mark, but still better, perhaps, for an independent, spirited young person than going back to Hurchester, and working at so much a month in the hospital wards. And, if the young people had come to an understanding, Miss Pentwistle felt firmly convinced in her own mind that neither of them would shrink from creeping up Lady Lowater's sleeve to the extent of hinting that a little increase of income would be desirable. She had a strong suspicion that the money to be disposed of in that codicil would go now, if not into the actual pocket of Stephen Rock and Miss Dormer, at least into a fund for the augmentation of the living, so that as long as they remained in the parish they would get the benefit of it.

With a mind full of uncomfortable thoughts, Miss Pentwistle went down to the Cove to have a chat with Mrs. Peti-

pase. Mrs. Petipase, seeing everybody, could throw a little light upon most things.

‘Do you think they are engaged, my dear Mrs. Petipase?’ she asked, after half-an-hour of general conversation. ‘If not, I should say they ought to be. You know I go to see the old man sometimes, and, from what I can gather from him, Mr. Rock is quite as much at the cottage as he is at his own house, and always contrives to be there, too, when Miss Dormer is with her grandfather. Of course it is a matter of arrangement, or it could not always happen so. A very poor thing for her, is it not?’

‘Oh! as good as she could expect, Miss Pentwistle, for that matter. Why, just fancy what courage a man must have to be willing to marry a girl under such circumstances, and in the very place, too,

where the whole thing has happened. I call it almost heroic of him.'

'Do you? I call it flying in the face of propriety. But Mr. Rock is a man who never hesitates about doing *that*. Since my encounter with him in the plantation path, I have, of course, given over attending the parish church, but I hear that his remarks from the pulpit are at times almost scurrilous. He is a man of no refinement, and that is no doubt why he can overlook the disgraceful circumstances with which Miss Dormer is so closely mixed up. But how they can marry upon a hundred a year is a mystery to me.'

'So it was to me, until the other day, when Colonel Pontifex called, and I was talking to him about it.'

'Colonel Pontifex!' and Miss Pentwistle's face at once assumed the 'rat i' the

arras' expression. He was the very man she wished to meet herself, if possible. 'Colonel Pontifex, my dear Mrs. Petipase! What light could he possibly give you upon the subject? Why, I don't suppose Miss Dormer has ever spoken to him.'

'No; but he trots about, and picks up everything, and then talks about it. And when I happened to say something about your Mr. Rock being so very attentive to Miss Dormer, and wondered if it would ever come to an engagement, and, if so, what they would have to marry upon, he looked as wise as an owl, and said that Lady Lowater could make that right easily enough. And then he chattered on—as you know he does, when once you get him going—and he said he had been sent for to the Court to give his assistance in some little legal matter. And as I knew Mr. Leybourne had been there as

well—for my husband saw him coming out of the park-gates—it was easy to put two and two together. And it is no more, my dear Miss Pentwistle, than Lady Lowater ought to do.'

Miss Pentwistle was not quite so sure of that. But was it a legacy, or was it an augmentation of the income? And how much was it likely to be? Mrs. Petipase could say nothing definite. She rather thought it was personal, from the manner in which Colonel Pontifex mentioned it. She could no doubt have found out, only she did not like to ask questions. One thing, however, was clear, that if the curate and Miss Dorner did wish to set up housekeeping together, want of funds need not prevent them. So Miss Pentwistle came home uncomforted.

Summer wore itself away into autumn, and still Lady Lowater lay there in her

room, just failing imperceptibly from day to day. She never got up at all now, but her bed had been moved into the window, so that she could look out over the plantation to the hand's-breadth of blue sky beyond Lady Belleray's chestnut-trees. Always, when she awoke from sleep, she searched for that first, whether with the bright glancing light of morning upon it, turning its passing sails to white, as of dove's wings ; or purple with the western glow, which made them seem as though wrapped in fire. And every day now, as the autumn blasts swept those chestnut leaves in golden showers across the park, a wider and a wider stretch of blue showed itself.

‘ You will soon see it quite away to the sunset,’ said Valence one day, as she sat by Lady Lowater’s side in that room looking westward. ‘ There is more of it every

day. When there has been another storm like the one we had last night, you will be able to watch the ships until they dip behind the farthest headland.'

'Yes,' said my lady, quietly; 'more of the great blue sea, as the dead leaves fall. What was it Mr. Rock said about that once, a long time ago? "Heaven's light looking in through earth's decay." I forget, but it seems to come back upon me. Did Mr. Rock say he would be here to-night, Valence?'

'Yes.'

And then, after a little silence, Valence said, taking Lady Lowater's hand, that lay so white and feeble amongst her wrappings,

'May I tell you something?'

'Yes, child, all you will.'

'I have promised Mr. Rock that I will not go back to Hurchester. I am going to stay here, and with him.'

There was a great light of love and tenderness in Lady Lowater's eyes as she turned them slowly upon Valence, whose face told all the rest.

'My child, I am very glad. I thought it would be so. I knew it must be so. But it is pleasant that you should tell me. I have seen it coming. He will love you better than—better than—'

And then her voice or her memory seemed to fail, or both, and she lay still, but with a smile of peace upon her lips.

Later Stephen Rock came in.

'Has Valence told you?'

'Yes, and I am very glad. Stay by me now. I want to sleep.'

Then by-and-by she whispered,

'Say to me that chapter about the pure river of the water of life.'

Stephen Rock repeated it. The brightness of its imagery seemed as if reflected

from the worn face beside him. Or was it only the glow of the setting sun that told its story there?

‘She sleeps,’ said Valence; ‘let us be quiet.’

‘No.’ And Stephen, rising, drew the curtains round her. ‘She has awokened. It is morning now.’

CHAPTER XXIII.

IT was nearly two years after that October evening that Stephen Rock and Valence, his wife, were standing together in Lowater Church, in front of a white marble tablet, the last which had been placed there.

They had been married twelve months, but they had not received any benefit from that codicil which had troubled Miss Pentwistle so sorely. When Lady Lowater's will was read, it was found that the codicil had been added to leave each of them the sum of one thousand pounds, being money which had accumulated since

the completion of the former part of the will.

‘Valence,’ said Stephen Rock, ‘will you have faith in me when I tell you that this money is not rightfully ours? As for myself, I will not use one farthing of it. I cannot prevent you from using what has legally been made yours. I can only tell you I would rather you did not.’

Valence looked at him. It was a few days after Lady Lowater’s funeral. She had gone back to the cottage, and was working for her grandfather as usual, in her blue hospital dress and apron.

‘If you think it does not belong to us,’ she said, with a wistful look from him to the old man who lay unconscious now, would so lie to the last—‘if you think it does not belong to us, we will not take it. But to whom does it belong?’

‘I can tell you nothing, Valence, except

that it is not ours. What is left to me, I shall hand over to the Hurchester hospital. It will seem more like using it for you so than in any other way.'

'Then, Stephen, I shall do the same.'

And Stephen Rock kissed her, holding her fast to him. So when the old man died months afterwards, and they were married, the curate took his bride to the little house by the church, where they lived a life scarcely less frugal and simple than that to which Valence had accustomed herself in the woodman's cottage. And having perfect trust in her husband's uprightness, and being at peace in the love which, with little of outward seeming, surrounded and sheltered her whole life, she never asked him any more questions. If they were poor, they were content, and those whose respect was worth having gave them it none the less freely

for those surroundings whose very simplicity had a dignity of their own.

If Miss Pentwistle, who to her disgust had only been 'remembered' with a legacy of twenty-five pounds, could have seen Stephen Rock and his wife as they stood together in the church that sunny August morning, she would perhaps have been convinced that happiness may be sublimely independent of codicils and an exalted social position. For Valence, in her sixpenny print and prettily tilted straw hat, looked almost insolently content with the portion of goods that had fallen to her; and the curate, though not a whit bigger than when he took up the whole of that bit of path in the plantation, had now that air of freedom and geniality and self-possession about him which only comes to a man whose life is, in the best sense of the word, satisfied from it-

self. But Miss Pentwistle was no longer there to see. She had taken her twenty-five pounds to Broxthorpe, near Crumbleby, where she was living upon it and her savings, with the two Miss Paskerleys, in a little cottage, compared with which even the dower-house on the edge of the park was magnificence itself. And, alas ! she was not living there with the happiness which is independent of codicils.

Valence had brought the last of the white lilies to lay upon Lady Lowater's grave. The new marble tablet was built in between the lancets of the early English window on the south side of the chancel. It was a plain panel, without ornament of any kind, save that the beautiful old mouldings of the window set it in a kind of frame-work. And this was the inscription upon it :

TO THE MEMORY OF
GWENDOLEN, LADY LOWATER,

Who died October 19th, 18—

Also of

M E R R I O N ,

Her only child,

Who perished bravely with his comrades of the —th,

In the burning ship 'Arethusa,'

July 20th, 18—.

'It is rather curious,' said Valence, standing by her husband's side there in the chancel, amongst the noble old Lowater people's monuments, 'it is rather curious that nothing is said about his being the ninth baronet. You see on the other tablets so much is made of the order of succession, and all that sort of thing.'

'It is just as Lady Lowater wished it, Valence. She told me the very words, and made me promise we would have them put as she told me.'

'Ah! well then, that is enough; though it does look rather bare. Then it was

Lady Lowater herself who wished that none of his styles and titles should be set forth?’

‘It was her own wish. Almost the last time she ever used a pen, indeed I think quite the last, was to write the copy of that inscription. And she charged me not to alter a single word, or put one in, except the date of her own death.’

‘That was very like Lady Lowater, Stephen. But for old Sir Guy to have so much said about him, and his noble wife so little, does not seem right. And did she choose that place for the tablet, too?’

‘Yes.’

‘When? After she became so ill?’

‘Yes. Why?’

‘Because, do you notice, that angel with the drawn sword in the eastern lancet stands between her grave and her husband’s. It is as if he were for ever parting them.’

Stephen Rock looked. It was indeed so.

'I had not noticed it before, Valence. But that is just where Lady Lowater ordered it to be put. She said it must be there or nowhere. And I obeyed her.'

Valence moved a little towards the front of the window, to read the inscription, graven in old German characters round the margin of the lancet. Her husband stood apart.

Yes, truly ; the angel with the drawn sword for ever between them. Had she indeed willed it so, thus mutely confessing to those of Sir Guy Lowater's house, living or dead, round about her amongst those chaneel stones, that she was worthy no place in their midst ? She apart, with the brave young soldier for whom there was no name, who had passed through flame to a brighter, better estate beyond ; she saved yet so as by fire, fire that had burned out the sin from her soul, but not its

stain from the past. Would she thus, apart from them all, for ever own that stain? Had she so ordered it that the angel with the drawn sword should separate between herself and the proud Lowaters, maidens, wives, and mothers, who had done their work and lived their lives so purely in that old home, no spot or speck upon their womanhood; she only the guilty one? Would she thus remind herself, far off from it now in her new-found robes of white, so hardly won, that the past never changes, that sin once done is done for ever?

Stephen Rock bowed his head, and his thoughts were as prayers.

Valence, slowly spelling out the legend, murmured,

‘To keep the gate of the garden of Eden.’

Stephen Rock started.

‘Yes,’ he said, with a great thrill of re-

verent joy, 'but to open that of Paradise. Look.'

For the noon-day sun, smiting just then through the angel's flaming sword and crimson robe, carried their brightness across the little chancel, and poured it, in a mingled glow as of fire and ruby, upon the quaint old oaken tablets opposite, where was graven the Apostles' Creed. And the ray that burned down from that angel's eye, and that other which flashed from the gems in his uplifted sword, fell upon these two sentences,

'The forgiveness of sins,'

'The Life Everlasting.'

Then Valence laid her white flowers upon Lady Lowater's grave, and came away.

THE END.

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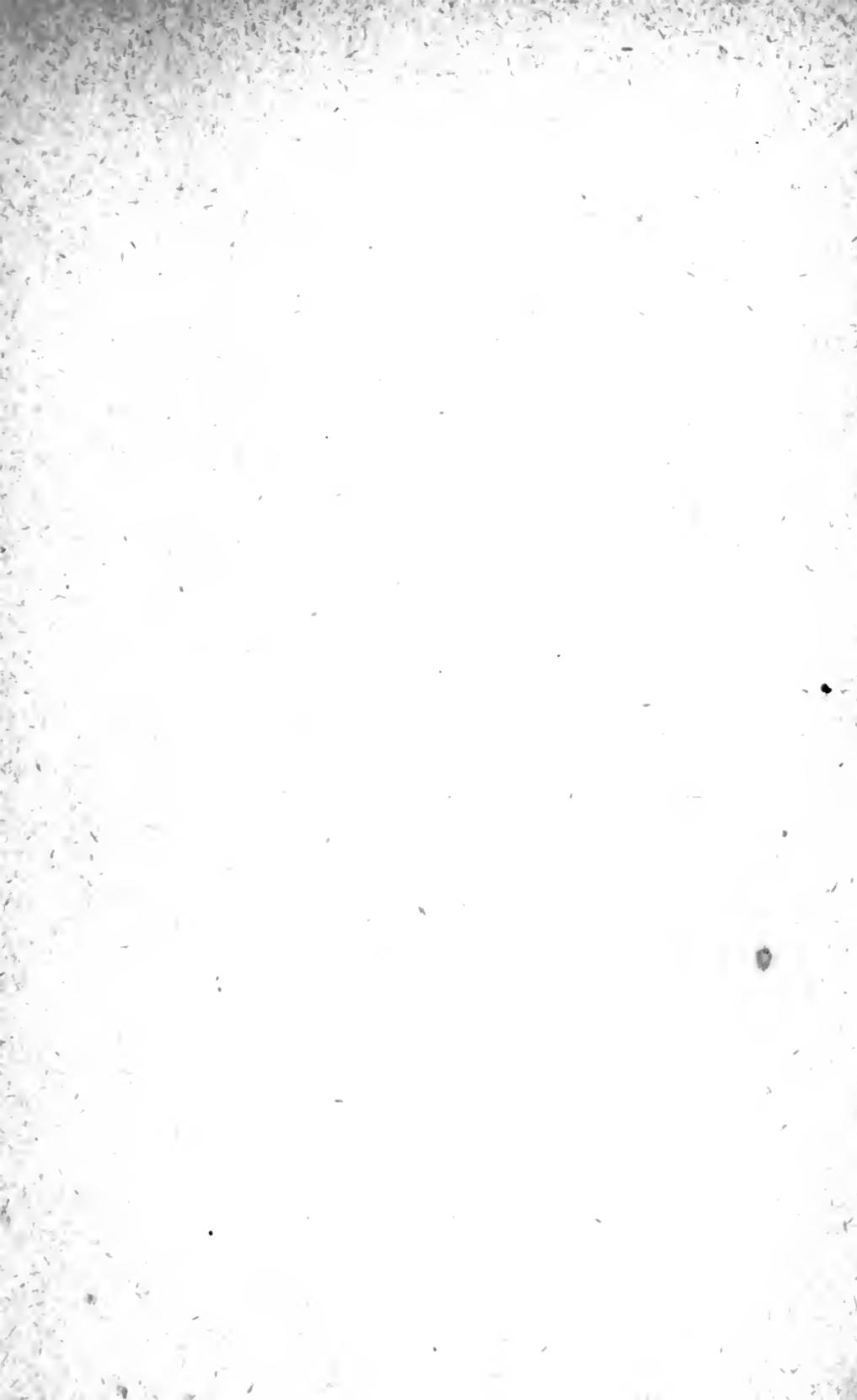
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